

Aura, Craft and Labour: The Critical Dialogue Between Photography and Painting.

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PhD Abstract.

From the closing decades of the twentieth century, the philosophy of Walter Benjamin has been readily employed by academics seeking to legitimate lens-based art as critical practice and challenge the ideals of high modernism. Yet this situation has engendered a compulsion to read Benjamin as a harbinger of post-modernism, a tendency responsible for severe miss-interpretations of his work. This is most evident in accounts of arguably his most famous thesis: the philosophy of the aura.

For scholars aiming to renounce autonomy, originality and genius in artistic labour, Benjamin's reading of the aura's decline has become a weapon of choice. However, although the auratic holds immediate significance for creative practice, what is often overlooked by invocations of Benjamin's study is the fact that the aura does not describe a material or phenomenal quality that objects may or may not possess. On the contrary, the aura is a form of perceptual experience, a sensation analogous to reverie or contemplation.

It is in response to claims that Benjamin's thesis has been misconstrued that *Aura, Craft and Labour* is conceived. My dissertation sets out to re-stage the critical study of the auratic and thus revivify the philosophical, political and psychological motifs at play in Benjamin's work. But to achieve this I do not intend to bypass subjects of artistic production and aesthetics. Rather, I aim to explore the sensory and experiential matrix of the auratic against the context of a critical dialogue between photography and painting, thereby identifying how an assessment of the breaks and ruptures that mark revolutions in creative practice can illuminate our insight into the aura debate.

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**“Aura, Craft and Labour: The critical Dialogue Between
Photography and Painting”**

Introduction.

I: The Return to Aura.

Recent decades have seen scholars grapple with two key problems: the drive to legitimate lens based art as critical practice and the simultaneous retrieval of the Avant-Garde from the marginalised position it assumed under the rubric of high modernism. In both cases, the work of Walter Benjamin has provided the ideological framework against which such campaigns seek validation. However, the academic legacy formed by these debates has proven to be highly problematic. From the vantage of the present, it can be argued that their legacy enabled Benjaminian philosophy to be considered an antecedent of post-modernism's re-theorization of art.¹ As Esther Leslie put it, the 1980s saw much effort spent to portray the writer as "a proto-poststructuralist, cut off by slippery signifiers from the concerns of Marxism".²

Benjamin's centrality to the post-modern reading of creative practice can be confirmed with reference to Jean-François Lyotard. Writing in *The Post-Modern Condition* he identified a theme that all readers of Walter Benjamin could easily identify, one that may be understood as follows: the notion that the industrial or mechanical might replace artisanal production becomes problematic only if one believes art to be a process whereby the "individuality of genius" is expressed through a mastery of craft-based skills.³

The problem with such interpretations hinges on their potential to engender a serious misinterpretation of Benjamin's ideas: specifically, the regressive application of the philosopher's work to limited debates seeking to compare the particular merits of photography and painting.⁴ Again, Lyotard provides a useful source with which to expound this claim. His reading of Benjamin culminates in

¹ Diarmuid Costello: "Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today", in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, London, Continuum, 2005, p164.

² Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin, Overpowering Conformism*, London, Pluto, 2000, p219.

³ Jean-François Lyotard: *The Post-Modern Condition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p74.

⁴ Diarmuid Costello: "Aura, Face, Photography", 2005, p164.

the proposition that still and cinematic photography can achieve both narrative and pictorial realism with a level of speed and accuracy that traditional modes of creative labour will struggle to match. Moreover, further evidence of photography's supremacy over easel art is located in Benjamin's identification of the camera as an apparatus that can disseminate its products to an audience of far greater size than the small number who might visit a gallery or museum.⁵ Thus Lyotard finds in Benjamin's prose the blueprints of a project that, if properly executed, would see photography succeed painting as the pre-eminent medium of pictorial communication.

However, attempts to prove this declaration have simplified Benjamin's ideas into a discourse regularly put forward to assert the camera's radicalism against the negativity of the brush,⁶ a tendency that has aroused profound scorn. In particular, Diarmuid Costello has avowed that the perpetuation of such readings fosters a narrow interpretation of Benjamin's most crucial and enigmatic thesis: the philosophy of the aura. To some extent this claim is valid. But the exchange between photography and painting cannot be considered a wholly superficial debate as it has a key role to play in critical studies of the auratic, and hence in any account seeking to reclaim or update that project. Yet before exploring the exact nature of this contribution, I will outline the factors that influenced Costello's position.

The feedback elicited by late 1970s and early 1980s Neo-Expressionism was central to post-modernism's appropriation of Benjamin's work. Contemporary attitudes to the 1981 Royal Academy exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting* are key in this respect. Curated by Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal and Nicholas Serota, the show avowed that gestural, expressive painting was the medium most able to explore human experience. As Jason Gaiger notes, the spectacle formed a manifesto designed to affirm the triumph of artistic tradition and belittle the achievements of conceptualism. Yet such positions have been viewed as untenable, a denouncement underpinned by Hal Foster's argument that restaging past styles will ultimately undermine the fact that artistic forms are conceived against specific cultural and social contexts. Consequently, we can only deduce that attempting to revivify a particular practice by claiming it

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard: *The Post-Modern Condition*, 1999, p74.

⁶ Diarmuid Costello: "Aura, Face, Photography", 2005, p164.

possessed a “natural” purchase on the human condition would be counterproductive.⁷

Foster famously defined such events as symptomatic of the crises faced by modernism, a discourse associated with the development of science and art according to their own internal, autonomous laws. For Foster, this project had to be replaced, a task that would represent a concern central to all critical artistic projects. But the issue of how this practice would be realised was itself contentious, anticipating wider conflicts between two emerging factions: the “post-modernism of reaction” and the “post-modernism of resistance”. The latter can be interpreted as an attempt to deconstruct modernism and renounce its traditions and histories, while the former can be considered a discourse opposed to both the ivory tower of modernism, and also the “false normativity of a reactionary postmodernism”. As Foster observes, “resistant post-modernism” attempts a “critical deconstruction of tradition”. That is, a “critique of origins” rather than a revivification of conventional methodologies.⁸ Accordingly, Costello contends that lens and technology based art became key to resistant critiques opposing creativity, uniqueness, authenticity, emotional expression, individualism and craft, categories central to canonical modernism and consequently the *New Spirit in Painting*. Hence he presents Benjamin’s critique of traditional aesthetics, and assertion of photography as an opposed form of creative labour, as crucial to those rallying against the “new-painting”.⁹

However, to assume that such debates represented the only outlet for Benjamin’s ideas would be uninformed. In the 1970s *Screen* provided a forum for critical readings of the philosopher’s work, printing English translations of texts such as ‘A Small History of Photography’ as early as 1972. The editorial to that very issue identifies Benjamin’s thoughts on “technological innovation” in art and aesthetics as crucial to the development of realism in contemporary cinema.¹⁰ Furthermore, *Screen* exerted a formative influence over Victor Burgin’s “Constructed Image” practice, a methodology that subsequently

⁷ Jason Gaiger: “Post Conceptual Painting”, in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, edited by Gill Perry & Paul Wood, London, Yale University Press in association with The Open University Press, 2004, p97.

⁸ Hal Foster: “Post-modernism: A Preface”, in *Post-modern Culture*, London, Pluto, edited by Hal Foster, 1985, pp vii – x.

⁹ Diarmuid Costello: “Aura, Face, Photography”, 2005, pp166 – 167.

¹⁰ See the editorial to *Screen*, spring 1972, pp 2 – 4.

underscored photography's pivotal position in postmodernist discourse.¹¹ For example, Peter Wollen's discussion of Benjamin's antipathy towards photographic pictorialism and attendant validation of the medium's archival potential¹² is typical of the debates that resurface in Burgin's later claim that photography, unlike painting, sits on the side of information and is readily accessible throughout the social sphere.¹³

That Costello overlooks such dialogues is consequential of the focus he placed on reclaiming Benjamin's ideas from the resistant post-modernism of Douglas Crimp, a critic who sought to reawaken the aura debate through the work of Robert Rauschenberg. Commenting upon the artist's defiant move from techniques of production to techniques of reproduction, Crimp claimed that Rauschenberg destroyed the "originality, authenticity and presence", crucial to the "ordered discourse" of the museum space. Accordingly, by following Benjamin's advocacy of mechanical reproduction Rauschenberg was able to create a post-modern practice that refuted the properties of the auratic.¹⁴

Yet for Costello, such readings are indicative of scholarship that pays little more than lip service to Benjamin's thought. Crimp's reading thus follows a failing endemic to summary accounts of the "aura debate" and portrays the thesis as a struggle acted out between an entrenched support for high modernism and a desire to engage the "technical – mechanical" situation of twentieth century life.¹⁵ Such perspectives are inaccurate, and anticipate a crisis that can be resolved only if auratic is approached as a subject that encompasses notions beyond these boundaries. What must be emphasised is that the aura denotes a category of experience and memory, and can be thus interpreted as pertinent to the subject, as opposed to object, of perception, and hence read as a sensation manifest through the exchange between subject and object. However, this assertion also suggests an important conclusion: namely, that if the subject's ability to perceive "auratically" is diminished then the phenomenon of the aura will decline in tandem. It is in response to such debates that Costello outlines the

¹¹ Jessica Evans: "Victor Burgin's Polysemic Dreamcoat" in *Art has no History: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*, edited by John Roberts, London, Verso, 1994, pp 204 – 212.

¹² Peter Wollen: "Photography and Aesthetics", in *Screen*, winter 1978/79, vol 19, no 4.

¹³ Jessica Evans: "Victor Burgin's Polysemic Dreamcoat", 1994, p212.

¹⁴ Douglas Crimp: "On the Museum's Ruins", in *Post-modern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, 1985, p53.

¹⁵ Robert Kaufman: "Aura, Still", in *October 99, Winter, 2002*, pp 46 – 47.

aura as that which not only demands a perceiving subject, but which also requires the subject to experience a specific, historically determined category of perception.¹⁶ Referring to Benjamin's original text will help to explain this idea.

"What is genuine aura?" Benjamin asks this question in 'A Small History of Photography'. In a later essay he provides the beginnings of an answer. "In no sense", he writes, can the concept be viewed as analogous to the fantastical, magic rays of light described by spiritualists and documented in texts exploring the realms of mysticism.¹⁷ Accordingly, it should be noted from the outset that the category under discussion should not be confused with "Kirlian" photography, the practice that aims to document the alleged "aura" or "luminescence" which some people claim to perceive as glowing energy field surrounding the human body.¹⁸ On the contrary, Benjamin states that the aura can be best understood as "a strange weave of space and time". That is, as the unique "appearance or semblance of distance" created by an object regardless of how close it may seem be.¹⁹

Against this background the question of how we feel or encounter aura becomes prudent. Responding to this dilemma, Benjamin found a useful metaphor in nature. In a famous passage from 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' he suggests that the individual who relaxes on a summer afternoon and allows their eye to become immersed in the sight of a distant mountain range, or who pauses to gaze at the branch of a sunlit tree that casts its shadow upon them, will "breathe" the aura of the mountains, of that branch.²⁰

In other words, the aura emanates from that which holds or arrests the viewer's contemplation, an act that likewise imbues the object of concentration with a sense of auratic distance. Thus the auratic can be identified as a perceptual

¹⁶ Diarmuid Costello: "Aura, Face, Photography", 2005, pp 167 – 168.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin: "Hashish, Beginning of March 1930", taken from Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927 – 1934*, London, The Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1999, p328.

¹⁸ Dr Vincenzo Nestler: "Preface" in *Kirlian Photography, Research and Prospects*, edited by Luigi Gernaro, Fulvio Guzzon, Pierluigi Marsigli, London, East-west, 1980, p5.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin: "Little History of Photography", taken from Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927 – 1934*, 1999, p518.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)" in Walter Benjamin: *selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p255. (Unless stated otherwise I will use the abbreviation "Artwork Essay" in subsequent references to this text.)

sensation encountered by the individual who approaches nature in a silent, meditative state: “the vision of someone who is submerged in a halcyon world”.²¹ It is in relation to the work of art that the full impact of such claims may be revealed. As Theodore Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory*, if we follow Benjamin’s attempt to explain the notion of aura in relation to the natural world, we can also reason that to encounter the aura of nature is to become aware of that aspect of the nature that represents the “defining element” of the work of art.²²

For Adorno, the aura is an “objective signification” that exceeds all “subjective intentions”. Thus for an artwork to convey aura it must reveal an “objective quality” that is greater than the “projection of the subject”. This notion of projection is crucial, for in Adorno’s philosophy the individual identifies with the work by losing himself or herself in the acts of beholding, listening or reading. In other words, Adorno contends that artworks are mobilised by silent contemplation. Hence in an ideal situation the individual will effect their “identification” with an artwork not by assimilating the artefact unto himself or herself, but by assimilating themselves unto the work. Leslie has sought to contextualise such encounters against the auratic itself, describing the sensory experience of genuine aura as a moment in which subject and object of perception achieve a state of union.²³

Yet Adorno also avows that the work of art cannot be thought of as a mere “receptacle” for the beholder’s psychology. Indeed, he claims interaction with the psyche is disastrous precisely because approaching art as an empty vessel enlivened and animated only by acts of subjective projection robs art of its distinctive character. If this occurs the object will be reified into an echo of the spectator, and thereby forced to say only that which the spectator wants it to say. As an example, Adorno cites the “banausic” reader whose assessment of literary texts rests upon the extent to which they can identify with the novel’s protagonists. While such acts may reduce the distance between beholder and work, false identification with fictional but “nevertheless empirical characters” is deeply problematic as it ignores the vital element of art that falls beyond the

²¹ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin, Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, pp 51 – 52.

²² Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984 p386.

²³ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin, Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p52.

sphere of empirical reality and therefore defies both factual description and reification.²⁴

This element may be defined as the “atmosphere” of the work, the objective trait formed within the artefact by the “connection of its moments insofar as they point beyond themselves, singly and together”. In this context, the atmosphere of the object corresponds to what Adorno calls the “plus of appearance” of the artwork, the surplus content mediated by the whole that is responsible for staging its transcendent quality. This idea confirms the parallel between art and nature, for nature’s beauty likewise stems from the fact that it is able to say more than the sum of its parts. Hence by revealing an objective quality beyond the subject’s interpretive projection, the “plus of appearance” becomes analogous to the notion of aura.²⁵ Yet as with nature, it is only through sensory immersion that the beholder can experience the phenomenon. The template for this model of objectivity, Adorno argues, is feeling of melancholia or tranquillity that is engendered by nature when it is not viewed as something to be acted upon. In other words, the individual who cannot perceive that nature possesses a transcendent quality that does not exist to satisfy any rational use-value will have no capacity for artistic experience. However, gazing at nature in this manner – as if it were wholly removed from any practical end – creates an effect of distancing. As Adorno observes, the “sense of distance from the artwork”, that underpins Benjamin’s notion of aura, is based upon the separation formed through this act of looking.²⁶ Thus the sensation of phenomenal distance created by contemplative, perceptual immersion becomes constitutive of auratic experience.

In Costello’s analysis, Crimp is accused of overlooking these perceptual and experiential classifications, a failing that is associated with both his unwillingness to consider the concept of aura in relation to the structure of perception and his subsequent engagement with the un-dialectical assumption that Benjamin champions the “transformation of perception”.²⁷ Crimp’s focus on such themes is evident in ‘On the Museum’s Ruins’, a text that echoes Lyotard’s reading of Benjamin and which recounts the camera’s ability to irreducibly

²⁴ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984 p25/pp 385 – 387.

²⁵ Ibid, pp 116 – 117/pp 385 – 387.

²⁶ Ibid, p386.

²⁷ Diarmuid Costello: “Aura, Face, Photography”, 2005, pp 166 – 168.

transform creative practice. As Crimp contends, the value of Benjamin's work hinged on the fact that it highlighted photography's potential to irreducibly transform the nature of creative practice, and thus imagine a future in which the art of painting would be rendered archaic following the destruction of its once important aura through the effects of mechanical reproduction.²⁸

For Costello, such arguments abstract Benjamin's ideas from their true focus and ignore the aura's status as a category of perceptual experience that is vulnerable to transformations over periods of time.²⁹ But for all Costello's eloquence, this position must not be accepted as the only viable interpretation of Benjamin's philosophy. An alternative reading of the "aura debate" exists, and engaging with this discourse implies that undermining the exchange between lens-based art and traditional practice threatens to discount a dialogue that holds crucial implications for the study of auratic experience. While it is certainly true that Benjamin defined the aura as a perceptual experience patterned upon the subject's response to natural forms, it must also be noted that in describing this sensation he was also anticipating a definite historical development: the impact technological production has upon art's ability to foster an immersive, auratic response.³⁰ Therefore, we must revisit an aforementioned project and assess the interplay between photography and painting in greater detail.

II: Photography and Painting.

The importance of such themes to Benjamin's ideology can be illustrated with reference to the 'Paris Diary' of 1930, and to the entry penned on the 4th February in particular. The passage in question describes a visit to La Maison des Amis des Livres, the famous bookshop owned by Adrienne Monnier that served as a forum for the work of authors such as James Joyce and Paul Valéry. Upon entering this space, Benjamin moves past the numerous tables adorned with "modern first editions", towards Monnier. He describes her as an individual to whom "one can never show enough respect". Together they sit at her narrow, book covered desk and discuss the intellectual issues of the day, notably the

²⁸ Douglas Crimp: "On the Museum's Ruins", 1985, pp 51 – 53.

²⁹ Diarmuid Costello: "Aura, Face, Photography", 2005, p168.

³⁰ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin, Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p52.

occult influence present in André Breton's second *Surrealist Manifesto*. As they talk the shop becomes crowded, and Benjamin fears that he is keeping her from her customers, but then he confesses his fascination for her eager "defence of photographs of works of art". Earlier in their discussion Benjamin had commented that it was easier to "enjoy" paintings and architectural or sculptural works as photographs, a viewpoint he suggests that Monnier seems to have shared.³¹ To illustrate this he recounts her words. For Monnier, works of art cannot be identified as the products of individuals. Rather, they are "collective objects" of such power that a reduction of their stature becomes a necessary condition of their reception. Crucially, it is mechanical reproduction that allows this to be achieved. The facsimile permits the beholder a sense of power over the object that subsequently enables and enhances their enjoyment of it.³²

As Charles W. Haxthausen notes, there is a direct lineage between Monnier's comments and the later 'Little History of Photography', a text in which Benjamin presents the following argument. He begins by claiming that it is inherently easier to receive and enjoy both painterly and sculptural works in photographs than in their original object form. But his central point rests on the fact that the development of such techniques of mass reproduction has transformed the manner in which the masses come to perceive and understand works of art. As Benjamin contends, it is no longer possible to speak of artworks as the product of the labour of a single individual. Rather, they have mutated into collective objects so powerful that any attempt to engage them first requires a reduction in their size. In this context, the techniques of mechanical reproduction are presented as a development that enables people to attain a "degree of power over the works without which they simply could not make use of them".³³

Essential to Haxthausen's study of these extracts is the shift in language that occurs between the texts in question: "enjoy" (*genießen*) becomes "assimilate" (*assimilieren*), while "enjoyment" (*genuß*) is recast as "use" (*verwendung*). In his reading, such terms correspond to a key passage from the 'Artwork Essay'.³⁴ In section three Benjamin argues that the modern public's need to "get hold of an

³¹ Walter Benjamin: "Paris Diary", in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Volume 2, 1927 – 1934, 1999, pp 346 – 347.

³² Ibid, p348.

³³ Walter Benjamin cited by Charles W. Haxthausen in "Reproduction/Repetition", *October* 107, Winter, 2004, p49. The quoted passages are from Haxthausen's own translation of Benjamin.

³⁴ Charles W. Haxthausen: *ibid*, p48.

object at close range in an image” will become progressively stronger. This drive is attributed to the masses unending drive to bring things closer to them both “spatially and humanly”, an impulse that threatens the uniqueness and authority of the original.³⁵ This suggests that the potential of photographic technology rests on its ability to – in Benjamin’s words – peel away the “shell” of the privileged object, hence destroying the auratic distance that separates it from the masses.³⁶ Authenticity is thus lost; the painting’s originality is replaced with an infinite number of copies and a detachment from tradition ensues.³⁷

It was Crimp’s interpretation of this idea to which Costello objected. Yet by referring to Benjamin’s original text it is possible to reconsider his intentions. The shattering of tradition is, for Benjamin, an emancipatory, rejuvenating force. Once reproduced, the object will be granted access to situations that were previously beyond reach and will thus be able to engage the beholder in their own environment.³⁸ Moreover, far from ignoring the mechanics of perceptual experience, such actions are deeply entwined with a radical re-working of auratic contemplation and therefore have a decisive impact upon the phenomenon.

Reading the ‘Artwork Essay’, Leslie reasons that aura is associated with a work’s “uniqueness”, a status derived not from an object’s specific properties but from its physical or “metaphorical” separation from the beholder. The connection between art and nature is again pertinent. Leslie argues that the auratic work “is not immediately accessible to perception” but is hidden and removed, distant and separated from the viewer. However, the distance in question does not describe a physical space between viewer and painting. It refers to the creation of a “psychological unapproachability”, a classification that allows auratic perception to be defined as that fostered by reactions to an authority derived from the artwork’s position within a tradition or social order.³⁹ As Stephen Heath writes, distance is a “demonstration of relations between structures”, a critical dialectics operative between “representation and production, image and material, subject

³⁵ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p255.

³⁶ Charles W. Haxthausen: “Reproduction/Repetition”, 2004, p48.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p254.

³⁸ Ibid, p254.

³⁹ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000 p145.

and language”.⁴⁰ The spacing created by the exchange between art and tradition can be approached in a similar context.

In Benjamin’s thesis, the cultic roots of art are key to understanding such claims. From its emergence in primitive times he contends that the art object has operated within systems of myth and ritual. Pre-historic cave paintings can be considered exemplars of this type, as each image was conceived as a magical offering designed to appease the spirits.⁴¹ After magic came religion and in the secular, post-renaissance age the cult of beauty. Though different in principle, each discourse shares a common drive to venerate the artwork, establishing a ritualistic function as inseparable from its existence.

As Benjamin summarised: the unique value and original utility of the “authentic” work of art can be traced to the domain of the ritual.⁴² It is this historic connection to varying notions of the sacred that forms the aura of the object, the experience of psychological distance that the beholder cannot surmount. As the philosopher concludes, if genuine aura denotes a unique appearance of distance regardless of how close a thing may be, then we can claim that the sensation in question is analogous to the phenomenal distance that develops between the subject and the cultic work of art, a separation which is born of the beholder’s perceptual and experiential response to the object of their vision. Although the spectator may be standing in physical proximity to a totemic or mythical form, it will remain unapproachable in the psychological sense. Thus “the nearness one may gain from its substance does not impair the distance which it retains in its apparition”.⁴³

A clear parallel with Adorno’s reading of aura can be formed in response to this point. As we have seen, Adorno claimed that, like the beauty of nature, art possesses a transcendent quality that cannot be readily qualified because it exists beyond the realm of factual description and empirical reality. Following Benjamin, however, this phenomenon can be attributed to the magical or cultic

⁴⁰ Stephen Heath: “Lessons form Brecht” in *Screen, Summer, 1974, Volume 15, Number 2*, p105.

⁴¹ Howard Caygill: *Walter Benjamin, The Colour of Experience*, London, Routledge, 1998, p106. See also Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version”, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935 – 1938*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p107.

⁴² Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version”, 2003, p256.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p272.

aspects of the work, for by definition such spiritual, supernatural categories will not interact with everyday experience. Therefore, like the splendour of the natural world, their intrinsic attachment to myth ensures that artistic forms are approached only as an object removed from the viewers practical ends.

Consequently, the reception of art will be dominated by a state of reverent contemplation through which the “atmosphere” or “plus of appearance” of the work can be engaged. The separation fostered by this act is crucial to the sensation of phenomenal distance the spectator encounters before the art object, which subsequently creates the register of auratic perception.

It is possible to confirm this proposition with reference to Benjamin’s discussion of the art of Ancient Greece. The first version of the ‘Artwork Essay’, dating from 1935, sees Benjamin identify the art of this era with the need to represent “*eternal values*” and therefore create work intended to last for eternity. The impossibility of technical reproduction beyond the processes that enabled the production of “bronzes, terra cottas and coins”⁴⁴ necessitated such measures. Uniqueness and eternal validity thus emerge in response to technological deficiency, the implications of which are decisive. As Howard Caygill observes, the emphasis that the ancient Greeks placed upon uniqueness served to engender a contemplative or cultic response to the artwork, thereby making it the “incarnation of eternal perfection or divinity”.⁴⁵ The mythical categories alluded to in this description highlight the ritualistic traditions that develop over time and influence the beholder’s interaction with works of art.

But the effect of the reproduction is to detach the authentic work from tradition, thereby removing it from the sphere of ritual. With this achieved, the perceptual experience of the spectator will no longer be influenced by the contemplation of cult values. As Leslie suggests: because photography renders the representation of beauty a task for the sciences, objects and matter will no longer be “possessed” or “made transcendent”. Hence an image or painting will no longer speak the ideals it was once required to utter. That is, it will no longer suggest a universal truth or offer a glimpse of some spiritual absolute.⁴⁶ The spell of auratic contemplation will be broken because technology allows existing

⁴⁴ Ibid, p252.

⁴⁵ Howard Caygill: *Walter Benjamin, The Colour of Experience*, 1998, p100.

⁴⁶ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin, Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p47.

pieces to be reproduced while simultaneously making reproducibility an intrinsic factor of new, photographic works. An argument from the *Arcades Project* confirms this assumption: the decimation of the aura in the age of mass production is perpetuated by the mass reproduction of the image.⁴⁷

III: Critical Problems.

Exploring such motifs brings two key issues to light. Firstly, Costello's dismissal of the exchange between photography and painting as parochial emerges as problematic. Even when viewed independently of the aura debate, there is compelling evidence to support this claim. That the dispute has engaged writers as diverse as Charles Baudelaire, Sergi Tret'iakov and Roland Barthes, to name but a few, indicates the weight of history that presses against any present or future accounts. Reflecting on the subject, Benjamin himself claimed that nineteenth-century debates seeking to assess the creative merit of photography seemed to be marked by confusion. Yet crucially, he also believed that this diminution would never mask the significance of the dialogue in question.⁴⁸ A similar degree of confusion today clouds suggestions that re-engaging the topic is a reductive activity. The contrary is in fact true. What cannot be overlooked is the long and intricate exchange between these practices that stems from the first experiments of Daguerre and Fox Talbot. As Anne Rorimer comments, the history of photography's search for fine art status is both "enriched and complicated" by the medium's complex relation to painting.⁴⁹ There are numerous accounts able to expound this claim, but for now Eugene Delacroix's opinions will prove instructive.

For Delacroix the daguerreotype offered more than a mere tracing. It created a mirror image in which details neglected by draughtsmen, artists or any other party concerned with the depiction of natural or material objects were made

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, [J60a,5], 1999, p337.

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p258.

⁴⁹ Anne Rorimer: *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2004, p113.

evident, thereby allowing the painter to develop a greater insight into the laws of shape and form.⁵⁰

Here the camera is presented as a superior drawing aid, a support apparatus subordinate to the artist's genuine creative practice. However, this position can be set against ideas Antoine Joseph Wiertz published in *Le National* in 1855, a text noteworthy for the esteem in which Benjamin held it. Titled 'La Photographie', the article in question counters the assumption that the daguerreotype deals a fatal blow to the work of art. On the contrary, it asserts that the practice "only kills the work of patience and pays homage to the work of thought". Thus Wiertz argues that when photography has developed beyond its infancy – and its true power and promise have been revealed – artists will view the camera as an ally rather than an enemy, and will seek to integrate its technology into their work.⁵¹

Benjamin viewed this as a "prophecy".⁵² The connotation is that he identifies the dialogue between photography and painting as pivotal to the evolution of creative practice. Revisiting this exchange today can be thus understood as a critical contribution to an ongoing narrative, rather than a prosaic or diminished line of thought. Therefore, while it is not my intention at this stage to champion or decry specific interpretations of these motifs, it is necessary to emphasise the depth and scope of the subject at hand.

Secondly, the conflicting responses to Benjamin outlined above indicate that in contemporary theory the auratic has become a site of critical dispute, with contrasting viewpoints forming limited readings of the phenomenon. Without doubt the interplay between notions of aura and radical ideology has numbered among the most contentious issues in recent debates. Pivotal to Benjamin's thesis is the potential of mechanically reproduced, non-auratic art to convey critical content, transforming itself thereby into a weapon primed and ready to fire from the frontline of class struggle. Freed from the constraints of aura, Benjamin claimed that creative labour would build an "art of the proletariat"; an art of a classless society that forsakes archaic notions like creativity, genius, eternal

⁵⁰ Eugène Delacroix quoted in Aaron Scharf: *Art and Photography*, New York, Penguin, 1983, p119.

⁵¹ Antoine Joseph Wiertz: "Photography", in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, edited by Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp 654 – 655.

⁵² Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project* [Y1,1], 1999, p671.

value and mystery.⁵³ Yet from the 1930s onwards this impulse has been deformed by a problematic reassertion of such categories, and consequently of artistic aura, in creative practice.

For example, revisiting the work of Victor Burgin, Steve Edwards identifies a parody of Benjamin's commitment to dismantle the "metaphysical ideologies of art". In Edwards' analysis this distortion finds its legacy in the "Burgin School", a "house style" comprising a combination of "tangential text" and studio based images either inspired by, or directly assimilating, paintings of the female form gleaned from art history.⁵⁴ Burgin's 1984 work *I'vegno per menarvi a l'altra riva* is taken as representative of this practice. Equally problematic is Burgin's endless recycling of visual material. In Jessica Evans' reading, the intertextuality that emerges through Burgin's use of appropriation paradoxically brings his work into contact with Greenbergian modernism. The critique of self referential, autonomous practice may be key to Burgin's *End of Art Theory* (1986), yet the artist's focus upon the coded signification operative in visual media and mass culture establishes his subject as the "form of representation" itself, thereby situating his work within the methodologies of formalism.⁵⁵ Moreover, she contends that post-modernism's intent to eradicate the distinction that separates high and low culture through appropriative methodologies actively contributes to the inversion of its creative goals, for such strategies are confined solely to the level of the image. As Evans concludes, making works that plunder and appropriate the motifs of popular culture will not shatter the distinction between "high" and "low" culture because the work will remain within the realm of the former, and will thus continue to operate within its conventions.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the distance such projects hold from the sphere of the everyday is identified as essential to their status as objects of critique, for if removed from the institutional context of the gallery there is seemingly very little to prevent work that plunders the cultural forms of mass media from being assimilated back into the "culture industry" that perpetuates the images appropriated by the artist. As Evans avows, this crisis can be resolved only by preserving art's distance

⁵³ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p252.

⁵⁴ Steve Edwards: "The Snapshooters of History, Passages on the Postmodern Argument", in *The Photography Reader*, edited by Liz Wells, London, Routledge, 2003 pp 190 – 191.

⁵⁵ Jessica Evans: "Victor Burgin's Polysemic Dreamcoat", 1994, p218.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p215.

from empirical life. The post-modernist is therefore compelled to re-engage Greenberg's distinction between the avant-garde and "kitsch" in order to differentiate their work from the disposable categories of pop culture. Against this framework, Edwards contends that Burgin does not follow Benjamin's attempt to demolish art's "privileged object" but reinstates "the art object into the privileged space of eternity". As Caygill's reading implies, eternity was key to Benjamin's thoughts upon the cultic content of art, as the unique value associated with the eternal influenced a ritualistic reception and auratic contemplation of the work. Hence if Edwards' analysis were to be advanced, it might be concluded that by repositioning the art object within this perceptual system Burgin ensures his work is met with the same sense of reverence. Therefore, while Burgin pays "formal homage to Benjamin", it can be concluded that his post-modern version of the avant-garde nevertheless reverses Benjaminian philosophy and "reinstates the aura".⁵⁷ Yet as Evans' reading suggests, without the distancing from empirical reality affected by auratic experience Burgin's work would not be able to operate as a critical practice.

Again, the auratic becomes contested territory, with its reception and interpretation identified as points of controversy. But Edwards' voice has not been unopposed. Critical essays have challenged his denunciations and professed that the phenomenon need not be viewed disparagingly. Such arguments are indebted to Adorno's work. As Robert Kaufman argues, Adorno polarised Benjamin's position and emphasised the auratic as a revolutionary force in creative practice, defending it as "indispensable rather than anathema to Marxian dialectics and other progressive or radically intended ideologies". Referring to this reading, Kaufman notes that for Adorno it is "auratic or autonomous art" which enables critical debate and "socio-political praxis". Thus, ideologies which validate the non-art or anti-aesthetic, and present a one sided critique of creative autonomy, contribute to the erosion of a critical response. Clearly, this refutes Benjamin's support for artistic products derived from strategies of technical reproduction that divest and negate aura in favour of political content. Consequently, we face the possibility that in an age dominated by post-

⁵⁷ Steve Edwards: "The Snapshooters of History", 2003 pp 190 – 191.

modernism's valorisation of "endless technological reproduction" there may well be a new vocation for auratic works of art.⁵⁸

Re-staging the critique of the aura may thus yield the conclusion that the phenomenon is vital to critical practice, an assumption that would grant painting – or the methodologies of subjective labour and creativity associated with the medium – a renewed purchase. In fact Adorno maintained that Benjamin was unwilling, albeit in conversation, to completely discount contemporary painting. Regardless of his commitment to mechanical reproduction, Adorno asserted that his contemporary believed that the traditions and histories of painting had to be preserved for times less harrowing than those of his lifetime.⁵⁹ Moreover, Leslie states that photography will be unable to deny the sensations of auratic perception if creative practice continues to explore certain subjects and if certain social relations remain unaltered.⁶⁰ As such, we may conclude that the aura always possesses the potential to re-emerge.

IV: Aura and Society.

In light of such conflicts we can say with conviction that a return to the philosophical study of aura is urgently required. This thesis proposes to address this imbalance and re-stage the critique of the phenomenon accordingly. Yet before undertaking this project it is vital to consider the relationship between auratic and social experience. Indeed, the aura atrophies alongside developments in social and technological spheres, and not in response to the influence of photographic practice alone.⁶¹ Yet it would be unwise to fully discount critical artistic debates when approaching such conceptions. Benjamin confirms this by suggesting that the conflict between painting and photography was symptomatic of wider historical transformations, the true implications of which were not understood by either of the rivals.⁶²

The extent to which Karl Marx influences such ideas cannot be underestimated. The condensed discussion of base and superstructure that precedes the 'Artwork

⁵⁸ Robert Kaufman: "Aura, Still", 2002, pp 46 – 50.

⁵⁹ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p442.

⁶⁰ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, pp 145 – 146.

⁶¹ Ibid, p146.

⁶² Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p258.

Essay' highlights the importance of the thesis to Benjamin's study. Following Marx the dichotomy in question can be given greater clarity, and defined as a system of relations operative between humanity and the social forces of production. As Marx argued, the totality of the social relations of production creates the economic structure of society, the foundation on which is constructed a "legal and political superstructure", and thus the forms and modes of contemporary social consciousness. Hence the modes of production dominant in "material life" determine the conditions of "social, political and intellectual life". But Marx also claims that at a certain points in history the forces of material production will clash with the "existing relations of production", creating a change in the "economic foundation" visible as a re-ordering of the entire superstructure. The shift from Feudalism to Capitalism – with its division of artisanal processes into their constituent parts, and emphasis upon the generation of surplus-value as the governing principle of commodity production and exchange – represents just such a revolution. Yet when approaching economic transformations of this type Marx warns that one must always differentiate between the "material transformation of the economic conditions of production", which can be engaged through natural science, and the transformations manifest in legal, political, religious, artistic and philosophical contexts: the ideological forms through which individuals become aware of changes in economic life and respond to them.⁶³ Thus Marx reasons that it is inappropriate to judge a period of economic transformation by assessing its consciousness. Rather, one has to do the opposite. That is, we must assess and explain the social consciousness manifest in periods marked by transformations in the economic base by engaging the conflict operative between the "social forces of production" and the "social relations of production" specific to that era.⁶⁴

In Benjamin's study, the perceptual and experiential registers of aura are positioned within this conceptual framework. As he argues: the development of human sense perception, and the mediums through which those changes are staged, are influenced by social factors as well as by nature. Consequently, perception emerges as a form of consciousness situated within the ideological

⁶³ Karl Marx: "Preface (To A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy)" in Karl Marx: *Early Writings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin in Association with The New Left Review, 1981, pp 424 – 426.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p426.

categories of superstructure, a faculty subject to the influence of developments in economy and production. That Marx places art within this context allows it to become the discourse through which such fluctuations may be cognized.

Benjamin viewed the art of the fifth century in precisely such terms. This era, which saw the emergence of the “late Roman art industry”, is credited with the formation of an art that was not only different from antiquity but which also created a new form of perception. But Benjamin reasons that scholastic research into the subject, for instance that of Alois Riegl, approached it from a formalist perspective unable to account for the social transformations expressed by these changes in perceptual sensation. Riegl’s declaration that “the Christian monuments of late antiquity” have not been studied from a perspective focused upon their formal properties⁶⁵ may have secured the impetus for his project, but it also represents the focus of Benjamin’s concerns.⁶⁶

However, Benjamin also claimed that the potential for similar insights was favourable in the present. The influence of photography upon creative practice is the focus of this proposition, for, as Leslie notes, Benjamin believed that fluctuations in perception were consequential of wider patterns of technological innovation. To be sure, the philosopher avowed that new artistic forms resulted from changes in human perception; the changes in question being those fostered by the visual shocks endemic in the everyday life of modernity. Such relationships may be summarised as follows: transformations in industrial, economic substructure create new perceptual demands that must be accommodated by revolutions in artistic production.⁶⁷

Crucially, the aura’s status as a perceptual sensation created or refused by the interplay staged between beholder and artwork⁶⁸ suggests it too will be influenced by such factors. Benjamin himself advanced a similar idea, arguing that if transformations in the “medium of present-day perception” can be understood as indicative of the aura’s debasement then it becomes possible to

⁶⁵ Alois Riegl: “Late Roman Art Industry”, in *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Eric Fernie, London, Phaidon, 2002, p121.

⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p255.

⁶⁷ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p153.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p145.

trace the social roots of its decay.⁶⁹ In this context, the exchange between photography and painting – which impacts directly upon auratic contemplation – becomes symptomatic of the wider social basis of the phenomenon's decline. To interpret this exchange the correlation between patterns of perceptual experience staged by works of art and the experiential matrix fostered by the social transformations of modernity needs clarification, as the elements are intertwined and co-dependant. Therefore we might deduce that Costello's definition of aura as a mode of perceptual experience that is subject to transformations over time is accurate but incomplete, for it is by studying the dialogue between photography and painting and its interplay with the conditions of everyday life that the sources underpinning such developments may be revealed. This discourse, combined with the ideas presented so far, will form the basis of my thesis.

Titled 'Walking Saturn's Rings', chapter one will focus upon the cultural landscape of the Second Republic and the Second Empire, as it is against the background of nineteenth century France that Benjamin locates the origins of the aura debate. Baudelaire will become a key figure in this context, as his depiction of modernity proved vital to Benjamin's thinking, along with the revised systems of labour, economy and commodity exchange staged within Hausmann's Paris. Such factors will initially be explored against Benjamin's interpretation of the modern world as a dreamscape or phantasmagoria, then through the philosopher's reading of the crisis of experience fostered by such environments. The critical and philosophical questions aroused by these motifs will be approached in relation to notions of aura, and contextualised against the art of the era; notably that of Courbet, Manet and the illustrator J. J. Grandville. Baudelaire's thesis on the painting of modern life, Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and the figure of the *Flâneur* will provide important points of reference.

The evolution of photography, and the medium's interplay with the avant-garde, will structure the second chapter. 'Documents For Artists' will emphasise the camera's centrality to Constructivism and Surrealism, and will engage early dilemmas concerning the camera's respective position within systems of art, science and industry. Attempts to implicate the photographic form within patterns of artistic convention will be subject to similar scrutiny. At stake here

⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p255.

will be issues of mechanical reproduction, mass dissemination, the political potential of non-auratic art, and the re-theorization of photography as a revolutionary artistic medium. A key debate will be the impact that conceptions of artistic genius have upon a work's capacity to foster acts of auratic experience, a subject that will be explored through the prose poems of Baudelaire and the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh. This discussion will be followed by an exploration of the extent to which photography's impact upon patterns of creative production and notions of artistic authorship influences an object's ability to trigger an immersive, meditative response. These last points will be elucidated with reference to the work of Eugène Atget and John Heartfield.

'Memory Traces' will explore the notion of empathy and its relationship to contemplative patterns of beholding. Specifically, it will expound the idea that to experience auratic immersion is to invest objects of perception with it the ability to look back. In raising this issue, the essay will expand a point referenced, albeit briefly, in connection with Adorno's reading of aura, namely the notion of the viewer assimilating himself or herself to the work. Pivotal to chapter three will be the theoretical writings of Michael Fried, notably his study of the German painter Adolph Menzel. The artist's work will be explored in relation to Benjamin's study of the experiential exchange that characterises the act of storytelling. Furthermore, it will be argued that the Freudian methodology the philosopher later employed to account for the transformation of experience responsible for the decline of the aura in Baudelaire can be used to illuminate the fluctuating status of empathy in creative practice. Key themes will be the influence that industrial labour and the sensory climate of modernity exert over the operations of memory and consciousness, a discussion that will be concluded in relation to Benjamin's notion of reception-in-distraction.

Chapter four will have dual points of focus. Firstly, it will engage Adorno's response to Benjamin, and the attendant assertion of autonomy as crucial to creative practice, and secondly, it will address the exchange between photography and painting staged by the "Neo-Avant-Garde". The essay will open a critical connection between the autonomous and the auratic by comparing the perceptual sensations staged by objects of pure beauty with the conditions of auratic experience. Central to this discussion will be a study of Jackson Pollock

and Abstract Expressionism. From here, I will address the political implications of autonomous art and explore the status of the aura in such debates.

The critical background established by these dialogues will be used to assess the legacy of gestural abstraction. I will question how ensuing generations reacted to a climate in which expressive, autonomous painting became prominent in the gallery, and will ask how the products of their response impacted on the auratic. Therefore, a significant area of debate will be the role photography played in the methodologies of conceptual and post-conceptual practice and the extent to which the camera's influence re-shaped relationships between beholder and artwork. The art of Robert Smithson will provide a framework against which such ideas are explored.

Following these chapter outlines it becomes advantageous to highlight a key discourse of my thesis. Put simply, I intend to elucidate the auratic in relation to three specific categories: empathy, mimesis and autonomy. Specifically, I will explore the divergent roles these different categories play in the development and formation of auratic experience and, moreover, will ask whether or not we can identify genuine aura as equivalent to, or consequential of, the subjects under discussion. Is aura the same as empathy, and if so how? What are the connections between auratic and mimesis, and do these interrelations render them indivisible? Finally, what is the exact nature of the exchange between Benjamin's strange weave of time and space and the autonomous? These are debates I aim to resolve.

The conclusion to my dissertation will explore a climate in which the camera has transcended its non-art status to become an accepted form of creative practice. Accordingly, I will look at the use of photography to revivify critical painterly practice, and consider the work of Jeff Wall in this context. It is patently possible that any notions of medium specificity will be exploded amid this critical framework. Costello formulates this idea with reference to Fried, who avowed that art becomes great only when it achieves an "exemplarity" in its given medium, an exemplarity that is judged against a work's ability to assimilate the historical zenith attained by past practice. This proclamation suggests a contentious conclusion: if a photographer were to rival the "highest achievements of past painting" would it be possible to view their work as a great painting rather than as a great photograph? The reverse situation is equally

applicable. If a painter were to equal the pinnacles of photographic labour, would the feat allow them to be perceived as a talented photographer rather than a pre-eminent exponent of their own discipline?⁷⁰

The initial response may well be “No”, but closer inspection of Fried’s thesis suggests answers to the contrary. As Costello reasons, the idea that we cannot say *a-priori* what may classify a work as an example of a particular medium beyond the assumption that it must pertain to the practice considered exemplary of the medium, raises an important conclusion. Specifically, the notion that if a photographer is able to make paintings by employing technology particular to photography – or if a painter can make photographs through the medium of paint – then we must ask whether it is still feasible to differentiate between the media in question?⁷¹

This hypothesis will raise many implications, but their impact can be gauged only if several issues are afforded greater definition. Crucially, the reasons why such cross-disciplinary practice has developed need greater consideration. As Jan Baetens writes: “Interdisciplinarity is not a decontextualized and dehistoricized phenomenon”.⁷² Thus we must ask what forces prompt photography to engage methodologies specific to painting, and vice versa? Similarly, if new forms of art parallel revolutions in the economic base, and if the perceptual transformations staged by such practices are symptomatic of social changes that impact upon the phenomenon of aura, then what factors, be they cultural, political or philosophical, inspire an exchange or union between the mediums? Furthermore, what implications will this situation hold for the auratic itself?

To close my introduction I thus offer the following summary of the issues that I believe must be addressed if the true focus of the aura debate is to be revealed. Firstly, if the aura denotes an experiential category, then the precise nature of auratic experience and the factors that engender such encounters must be clarified. Similarly, the forces that may debase such sensations have to be

⁷⁰ Diarmuid Costello: “After Medium Specificity Chez Fried: Jeff Wall as Painter; Gerhard Richter as Photographer” in *Photography Theory*, edited by James Elkins, London, Routledge, 2007, p75. Here Costello refers to arguments raised in Fried’s “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s New Paintings” and “Art and Objecthood”, both of which are reprinted in *Art and Objecthood*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1998.

⁷¹ Ibid, p78.

⁷² Jan Baetens: “Conceptual limitations of Our Reflection on Photography: *The Question of Interdisciplinarity*” in *Photography Theory*, 2007, p56.

identified. Secondly, we need to ask how artworks might foster conditions of auratic engagement, and also consider what impact such acts might have upon the object in question. Thirdly, we need to explore the interplay operative between the perceptual experiences manifest in everyday life and those staged by works of art, and decipher what implications such connections hold for the auratic. Fourth, it is imperative that a cogent assessment of how art objects become purged of the capacity to enact genuine aura is formed. Finally, we must consider the legacy of the above issues and ask whether the aura is crucial or detrimental to critical practice. The possibilities and dilemmas suggested by a non-auratic artwork have to be explored.

Together, these themes mark the intellectual territory against which my research is conceived. I intend to re-stage the critical study of the aura and thus enhance our understanding of one of the most influential, yet elusive, discourses of the modern age.

**“Walking Saturn’s Rings: Cultural Transformations in
Nineteenth-Century France”**

“Walking Saturn’s Rings”.

I: Grandville.

If Paris is a city of dreams then, following Benjamin, we might conclude that the aura represents its greatest enigma. It was through Baudelaire’s vision of the French capital that Benjamin first located the conditions of aura’s decline, and thus began his philosophical study of the phenomenon. If it is our intention to re-stage this critique, then the environments Benjamin studied will likewise provide our point of departure. In the above introduction, I presented aura as a category of perceptual experience subject to the influence of transformations in the economic base. To test this hypothesis therefore entails considering the auratic against the context of social and political change. Paris, and the cultural climate of nineteenth century France, will provide a background against which this can be achieved. As such, this chapter will focus upon an era of revolution, an age marked by transformations in the mode of production, industry and everyday life. I will begin by sketching the landscape forged by these fluctuations, in which commodity production and exchange came to dominate both personal and social relations, before exploring the factors that shaped this reality. With this framework established, I will explore the implications such formations hold for the sensory matrix of the auratic.

In 1867 Edouard Manet painted a view of *L’Exposition Universelle*, a landscape of freshly watered flowers, carefully tended strips of lawn and passers by treading the path of a softly curving promenade. Behind this foreground lay the vista of halls and towers constructed solely for the occasion. As T. J. Clark comments, the Paris depicted was pure “pantomime”. The spectacle even attracts a hot air balloonist who pilots his craft lazily across the canvas, giving him a birds-eye view of proceedings below. Crucially, event organisers spared little effort to grant the public a similarly unobstructed outlook. The scene Manet paints, for instance, was created by a literal act of earth moving. A hill, the *Bulle de Chaillot*, was lowered by twenty feet to make the aspect more harmonious.

The comic value of this intervention was not lost on Clark, who claimed that the act provided a point of attraction in its own right. Yet this detail would not be the picture's only source of amusement. Equally humorous are the figures that enjoy the exhibition whilst ensuring that their enjoyment does not go unnoticed.

Manet's spectators attempt theatrical grandeur and make animated gestures towards what might be considered a magnificent stage set. The gentleman surveying events through a pair of binoculars and his female companion looking out from the shade of a powder blue parasol are exemplars of this social pageantry. The work thus becomes a comedy of fashions, a "parade of types" unfolding against an apt location.¹

Benjamin reflected on the phenomenon of world exhibitions in his 1935 *exposé*, 'Paris, The Capital of the Nineteenth Century'. He dubbed them "places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish" and traced their origins to the national industrial exhibitions, the first of which took place on the *Champ de Mars* in 1789. Subsequent events were held from 1801 to 1899, each citing a wish to "entertain the working classes" as their principal aim. For Benjamin, however, this goal was misjudged. Rather than presenting festivals of emancipation they glorified the commodity's exchange value, forming a glamorous veneer under which its use-value was obscured. Such environments were attuned to the pleasure of distraction and the *Exposition Universelle* of 1867 represented the purest distillation of this experience, the most beautiful blossoming of capitalist culture.²

The words of Adolphe Démy guide the reader through this spectacle. In his account of the event he describes the layout developed by Le Play, the chief of the exhibition committee, in particular detail. As he recounts, all items were categorised into specific groups and then placed into one of eight "concentric galleries". The products of many nations were exhibited in these spaces. Hence walking around the galleries allowed individuals to survey the divergent industries operative in different countries. Onlookers were even able to identify a specific branch of industry and, by moving between specific sections of the

¹ T. J. Clark: *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1999, pp 61 – 63.

² Walter Benjamin: "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935 – 1938*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, pp 36 – 37.

event, identify which country had achieved the greatest success in any given process or occupation.³

The global ambition of the 1867 fair is confirmed by a review cited in the *Arcades Project*. Echoing Démy's description, the writer declares that to walk through this place was like travelling around the world, for all countries had come to sell their wares.⁴ No quarter could escape the grand exhibitions of Imperial Paris and their opulent bounty of commodities: the urge to buy touched all.⁵ The impact such events had upon local industry proved similarly massive, establishing a legacy that permeated the language of advertising and locked French stores in a race to become the largest on the planet.⁶

In Benjamin's analysis, the art of J. J. Grandville – and notably *Le Pont des Planètes* – could be viewed against such phenomena. Taken from Grandville's *Another World* (1844), the picture evokes the journey of a “fantastic little hobgoblin” who makes an adventurous quest across outer space, and depicts an extraordinary piece of architecture, the length of which spans the solar system. The image shows a huge interstellar bridge, which is so large that its foundations are set into planets. The “three-hundred-thirty-three-thousandth pier”, Benjamin tells us, rested on Saturn. As the goblin walks past this particular section he is surprised to notice that the planet's famous rings have been clad in iron, forming a circular promenade around which those who lived on Saturn could stroll, as if to take a breath of evening air.⁷

This fantastical image can be associated with the world exhibitions, as event organisers would often construct cast iron balconies designed to represent the rings of Saturn. Accordingly, those who traversed such structures entered a “phantasmagoria” whereby they became the population of Saturn.⁸ The structures built to house the 1867 showcase were no exception, and many

³ Adolphe Démy: “Essai historique sur les expositions universelles de Paris”, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, [G9,1], 1999, p189. (In quotations from and references to *The Arcades Project* I will include the numerical references Benjamin used in his *Convolutés*.)

⁴ Walter Benjamin: *ibid*, [G2,4], 1999, pp 175 – 176.

⁵ Graeme Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis, Walter Benjamin and the City*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996, p117.

⁶ Adolf Ebling *Lebende Bilder aus dem modernen Paris*, 4 vols, Cologne, 1863 – 1866, vol. 2, pp 292 – 294, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, [G2,1], 1999, pp 174 – 175.

⁷ J.J. Grandville quoted by Walter Benjamin in: “The Ring of Saturn or Some Remarks on Iron Construction” in Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, 1999, p885.

⁸ Walter Benjamin: “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, 2002, p37.

compared them to extraterrestrial forms. After visiting the site Théophile Gautier avowed that its decoration evoked distant planets and alien landscapes that human eyes had never before encountered.⁹ For Benjamin, the link between such wondrous sensations, and the cosmic journey evoked by Grandville, cast the “enthronement of the commodity” as the hidden theme of his art.¹⁰ However, to fully understand this reading of commodity culture as a landscape of fantasy and dreams it is appropriate to follow Benjamin and turn to Marx.

II: Marx.

Discussing the commodity, Marx argued that it would be a mistake to accept it as “trivial”. In contrast, he claimed that a matrix of “metaphysical subtleties” and “theological niceties” abound in its structure. Benjamin would famously remark upon Grandville’s ability to convey such qualities in his art. However, this “mystical character” would not originate in the commodity’s use-value. That is, from the fact that humanity uses the application of specific skills to turn natural materials into items able to satisfy particular wants. On the contrary, it would stem from the fact that commodities possess both exchange values and use-values;¹¹ a fact Benjamin hints at above.

As Marx writes in *Capital*, every product of human labour can be identified as an item that possesses a use-value. But it is only at specific points in the development of society that a transformation will occur that allows an object of utility to be identified as a commodity. The transformation in question will take place when society comes to view the labour expended in order to make a utility as a quality that determines the value of that item.¹²

Under such systems, the complexity of labour utilized by acts of manufacture, and the value of objects created through that manufacture, become proportionally linked. For example, turning a piece of wood into a table expends the “human brain, nerves” and “muscles”; an outlay that subsequently determines the value

⁹ Théophile Gautier cited by Susan Buck-Morss in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, London, MIT Press, 1991, p85.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin: “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939”, in Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, 1999, pp 17 – 18.

¹¹ Karl Marx: *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, St Ives, Penguin in association with the New Left Review, 1990, p165.

¹² Karl Marx: *Capital*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p34.

of the finished product. The implications raised by these ideas can be phrased as follows. An efficient labour process will necessitate a comparatively short amount of “labour-time” in order to produce an object. As such, because a brief quantity of labour is required to make it, the artefact wrought by an efficient labour process will be of a correspondingly low value. Conversely, where labour is less efficient a greater amount of work will be needed to complete a production process. Accordingly, when this situation is manifest the resulting item will be of higher value because an increased level of toil will have been spent in its manufacture.¹³ Moreover, against the background of these arguments Marx asserted that whenever an individual makes a commodity in order to exchange it with other producers, the social relationships that would have once existed between such parties will be replaced by a form of social relationship manifest between the products of their toil.¹⁴

This idea may be elucidated as follows. Socially independent producers make commodities and view them as sources of exchange value. Articles of this type are subsequently exchanged with other producers, who both recognise and need the utility they embody. This process occurs through systems of “barter” in which money (or a form of money such as land, live-stock or other items) equivalent to the labour value expended in the construction of the commodity is exchanged for the article in question.¹⁵ Hence the interplay between the “labour of the individual” and the wider “labour of society” is established not as a direct social relation between individuals, but as material relations between producers of goods and social relations manifest between the products of their labour. To find an analogy for this situation Marx argues that we must turn to the discourse of religion, for in that world items wrought by human skill become “autonomous” objects imbued with a subjective essence that enables them to form relationships with other people. That the exchange and production of commodities allows inanimate matter to enter into relationships with other people means that the commodity will take on the same character as the cultic icon. Thus when Marx speaks of the fetishism of the commodities he is referring

¹³ Ibid, p17.

¹⁴ Karl Marx: *Capital, Volume 1*, 1990, p165.

¹⁵ Ibid, p181.

to the capacity of such artefacts to re-stage the social relations fostered by the fetishistic form.¹⁶

However, Marx also believed the commodity held the potential to induce alienation, a situation that could be considered consequential of capitalist industry. Like the individual producer, the capitalist seeks to make commodities that can be sold or exchanged, but crucially he also aims to produce items with an exchange-value greater than his original investment. In other words, he seeks to generate surplus value through the manufacturing process itself. To achieve this, he or she employs workers to make artefacts while simultaneously accruing surplus labour from his employees, for surplus value is formed only by the creation of excess of labour, by a “lengthening of one and the same labour processes”.¹⁷

As Marx argues, the worker views their labour power as a commodity that can be sold in order to maintain their subsistence. This labour can have a cost indicative of its intricacy, e.g. six “shillings” for one day’s toil. But in order to accumulate surplus labour, and hence surplus value, the businessman must extend the working day beyond the time it takes the employee to realise the wage value of their labour power. Consequently, if it takes six hours toil to meet the cost of the worker’s subsistence and the capitalist’s expenditure, then surplus value can be gleaned by lengthening the working day from between 8 – 18 hours, depending upon physical, social, mental and environmental limitations.¹⁸ However, such acts were considered by many to be deeply immoral and in England were constrained by the parliamentary “Factory Acts” of 1833 – 64, which sought to standardise a ten-hour working shift and protect the labourer’s health and sanity against exploitation. Marx would illustrate the urgency of this need with reference to numerous case studies, notably that of Mary Anne Walkerly, who died at 20 through excess work, insufficient food and gradual suffocation caused by a lack of air in her workspace.¹⁹ The problem facing the capitalist thus became how to generate surplus value without overworking their employees. This issue anticipates a more general concern faced by factory owners across Europe, the quandary of how to increase profits?

¹⁶ Ibid, p165.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp 293 – 306.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp 340 – 342.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp 344 – 367.

This was a complex dilemma. “Raw materials”, “auxiliary materials” and “instruments of labour” represented fixed aspects of production that could not be negated.²⁰ Likewise, the workers’ pay could not be reduced, as this would not correspond to their needs of subsistence or to the value of their labour. Therefore, rather than cutting the amount spent on goods or wages, the employers’ only option would be to find some way of diminishing the actual value of the labour performed by the worker.²¹ This demanded the objectification of only socially necessary labour in the production process, which in turn required a maximisation of efficiency.

As Marx explains, factory owners achieved this by dividing complex tasks into their constituent parts, thereby replacing the individual craftsman with a group of workers, each focused on a specific aspect of an object’s manufacture. The notion of an individual crafting a unique product is thus rendered archaic, insofar as a collective chain of workers is established in his or her place. Skill levels are consequently reduced, because the dexterity of the artisan is broken down, simplified and shared, an act that cheapens the value of labour itself. A working day can therefore comprise a higher percentage of surplus labour, as the time to realise the monetary value of the worker’s labour will fall. And as the value of each commodity hinges upon the amount of labour expelled in its production, this additional work yields surplus value in commodity form. Furthermore, because each worker develops the raw materials processed by the previous link in the chain, a natural time limit is enforced upon each stage of production, enabling such articles to be manufactured with great speed. Once sold or exchanged, these artefacts realise the capitalist’s goal of profit upon the capital advanced to begin production. Automation perpetuates this situation by casting the worker in the further debased role of machine operator.²² Whereas the worker once utilized a tool, a machine now utilizes him or her. Thus the value of their labour will fall again.²³ Consequently, even less time will elapse before the worker’s vocation realises its equivalent value, increasing both the surplus labour and surplus value produced.

²⁰ Ibid, pp 307 – 319.

²¹ Ibid, pp 429 – 438.

²² Ibid, pp 355 – 358/pp 429 - 491.

²³ Ibid, p548.

III: Dream World.

However, mechanization and division of labour engender a state of uniform perfection, whereby all goods are produced with identical precision. The marks of human skill thus vanish amid a stream of homogenised artefacts.²⁴ As Esther Leslie observed, any evidence of craft and skill will be masked, as if to conceal the fact that the individual who exchanges commodities did not make the artefacts but “appropriated the work contained in them”.²⁵ Under such systems, items fashioned by the subject will confront him as something alien because, as he completes acts of productive labour he will become estranged from himself.²⁶

As Marx argued, man possesses the conscious free will to create an “*objective world*” through the “*fashioning* of inorganic nature”. Animals, it is true, also build their own environment, but do so only in response to specific needs. A beehive, for example, satisfies the wants of shelter and safety. Humanity, however, is not fettered by immediate physical demands, and can fashion articles that satisfy other desires, like beauty. It is through such acts that man “reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually”. That is, the individual is able to contemplate themselves in a world that they have created, allowing the objects wrought by human endeavour to become part of human consciousness. Accordingly, the subject meets himself in the objects of his labour and meets others in the forms they have fashioned. Yet when the worker becomes estranged from the outcomes of their toil, when they can no longer contemplate themselves in the things they have fashioned, this exchange can no longer endure and a detachment from reality ensues.²⁷ The automation of modern industry provoked this exact experience. Because capitalist economy purged all evidence of the workers’ craft, the products of their labour were returned to them as fantastic objects that appeared to be the creation of some divine or magical force.²⁸

Such ideas informed Benjamin’s reading of nineteenth century culture. But this was less an economic inquiry than a “philosophy of historical experience”

²⁴ Graeme Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, p119.

²⁵ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, London, Pluto, 2000, p193.

²⁶ Karl Marx: “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin in association with the New Left Review, 1981, p326.

²⁷ Ibid, pp 328 – 330.

²⁸ Graeme Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, p119.

exploring the sensations fostered by the age of high capitalism.²⁹ Key to this study would be the Parisian arcades, a site of enduring fascination for the writer.

In 1852, the *Illustrated Guide to Paris* described the “inner boulevards” as a luxurious innovation in the field of modern consumerism. The arcades boasted glass ceilings and marble-clad corridors that stretched through whole buildings that had been altered to accommodate them. Lit from above, these halls were lined on either side with beautiful shops, effectively forming a miniature indoor city. Within the customer would find everything they needed, they could even shelter from a sudden storm and promenade safely through its gleaming avenues.³⁰

Once safely ensconced, the consumer would enjoy an enticing display. The arrangement of goods was like a picture puzzle: hair dryers would hang next to figurines of the *Venus de Milo*, “prosthesis and letter writing manual” were brought into juxtaposition, and always a swift interchange of colour would delight.³¹ A letter written to Gretel Adorno in March 1939 reveals the impact this landscape had upon Benjamin’s work. Speaking of his ongoing *Arcades Project*, the philosopher remarks how he has “busied” himself with one of the key concepts of his research, placing at the centre of his study the contention that the commodity-producing society creates a cultural phantasmagoria.³²

We encountered the term “Phantasmagoria” in Benjamin’s discussion of Grandville, but only now are we able to assess its significance. The word originally referred to a machine of nineteenth century origin, a device that conveyed a sequence of spectral images to its audience. Watching such displays would be an illusory, dreamlike experience, as the beholder would see things that were not literally real. A similar dreamscape would account for the subject’s reception of modernity. As Leslie contends, the misinterpretations of reality encountered by the individuals who beheld the ghostly projections of the phantasmagoria would mirror the manner in which people perceived the contents of their everyday worlds.³³ The fleeting, fragmented impressions cast by an

²⁹ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p81.

³⁰ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [A1,1], 1999, p31.

³¹ Walter Benjamin “The Arcades of Paris [Paris Arcades II]” in Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, 1999, pp 874 – 875.

³² Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften vol V*, p1172, quoted by Graeme Gilloch in *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, p205.

³³ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p106.

accelerated pace of life accounted, in part, for such sensations. Yet Benjamin also discerned an economic base to the phenomenon, which he identified with reference to Marx. As he argued, “the property appertaining to the commodity as its fetish character” also attaches itself to the “commodity producing society”, but only when it begins to overlook or abstract itself from the fact that is engaged in the production of commodities.³⁴

In other words, the estrangement caused by an economy that masked all traces of human involvement in the manufacture of goods compelled the worker to forget their status as producers, forming a misappropriation central to Benjamin’s notion of the social phantasmagoria. For Benjamin, the masses would experience reality as a dream world or phantasmagoria precisely because the “relations of production” caused them to overlook the fact that they were makers of commodities.³⁵ This situation engenders numerous debates, yet they can be engaged only if the political formations underpinning the culture of nineteenth century France are explored. It becomes necessary, therefore, to contextualise the reign of Louis Napoleon against the preceding age of the Second Republic. Events beginning in 1848 hence become a crucial point of focus.

IV: Revolution.

1848 was the year of the February revolution. For three days an “alliance of classes” fought to secure rights of universal suffrage across the population, ousting the “July Monarchy” formed by Louis Phillipe in 1830. However, this union was itself riddled with division, comprising as it did the polarised groups of proletariat and bourgeoisie. Honoré Daumier anticipated the problems born of this coalition. Writing to his mother in 1847, he speculated that Paris might spiral into revolution. Yet he was not fearful of the threat posed by the people, but rather that of the bourgeoisie. His chief concern was that the middle classes would exploit the ensuing power vacuum and ordain themselves “the new royalty”.³⁶ For Kristin Ross, such prophecies were historically accurate. As she argues, Marx maintained that the uprising of 1848 succeeded only in

³⁴ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [X13,a], 1999, pp 669 – 700.

³⁵ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p193.

³⁶ T. J. Clark: *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848 – 1851*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1973, pp 9 – 11.

“transferring power from one faction to another”.³⁷ Key to this process would be an attempt to transfigure events so that Parisian businessmen and proprietors would be heroised for their part in the insurgency.

The February revolution was fought and won on the barricades, a tactic that had historical precedent in France. Barricades were structures that stretched across whole streets and offered insurgents a defensive shield. A description of one such construction dating from 1840 notes that its components included upturned carts, boxes intended to hold fruits, wheels of various sizes and numerous small fires that spewed forth plumes of blue smoke.³⁸

Such scenes were emblematic of working class emancipation. But the vision of the worker as radical was not one the bourgeoisie supported; hence they sought to invest the barricade with their own symbolism. They claimed it represented the triumph of “good will” over “tyranny”, integrating it into the myth that the self-made man had constructed the nation. Yet this myth was exactly that. While artisans and labourers alike met government forces during the February uprising, their wealthy counterparts were more likely to have merely refused the state’s plea for defence against the insurgents. In this context, the workers fighting on the barricade become akin to “serfs fighting their masters battles”.³⁹

Against this divided background, the utopianism of the Second Republic rapidly declined, with many of its social promises going unfulfilled. The establishment of “national workshops” to support the unemployed, the introduction of a standardized ten hour working day and the nationalisation of the country’s railways numbered among the most contentious issues. Civil unrest became outright rebellion when a resolution drafted on the 22nd June 1848 cancelled the national workshop programme. By the following evening a long line of barricades had been erected, stretching across the city and dividing it in two. In the eastern half, the working class region of the city, a total of 50,000 men and women took arms and were mobilized against the Republic. Initially they gained ground, but the response of the government was swift. The Garde Mobile, with their armoury of heavy guns, was deployed and the revolt was

³⁷ Kristin Ross: *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 1988, p22.

³⁸ Gaëtan Niépovié: *Etudes physiologiques sur les grandes métropoles de l’Europe occidentale*, Paris, 1840, p207, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, [E9a,1], 1999, p141.

³⁹ T. J. Clark: *The Absolute Bourgeois*, 1973, pp 9 – 19.

quelled by 26th June. Marx defined these “June Days” as the “Ugly” revolution, contrasting them with the beauty of the February uprising.⁴⁰ For T.J. Clark, however, they were a war for civilization, which saw the bourgeoisie fighting to defend social order and the workers fighting for their social rights.⁴¹ Crucially, this social disharmony would swell and impact upon artistic practice. As Théophile Thoré commented, following the onset of social unrest the arts have been forced to “fend for themselves”.⁴²

Describing the demands created by the February revolution, Théophile Gautier speculated that, in order to echo the new social climate, the buildings and monuments of Paris should have been decorated with a fantastic range of masterpieces evocative of the new sense of liberty that dominated the metropolis.⁴³ However, such plans never reached fruition and the Republic failed to find an image to unite its disparate parts. Festivals of art and fraternity were staged, but quickly became objects of ridicule. Ambitions to adorn the ‘Arc de Triomphe’ with potent symbols of uprising, such as a “giant eagle” or “bronze colossus of liberty”, went unrealised, and an intended programme of state sponsorship for the arts fell into decline.⁴⁴

Similarly problematic was a competition announced in March 1848, offering artists the opportunity to design a painting, sculpture or medallion “of the Republic”. Essentially asking: “what was the Republic and how should it be represented”, the brief was too ambiguous and those seeking advice were given only “vague rhetoric or pedantic instructions”. Many artists simply yielded to those in power and followed the schema relayed by a “ministry spokesman” who advocated the unification of “liberty, equality and fraternity” in a single figure. This personification of the Republic was to be seated, to impress notions of stability upon the spectator, and the *tricolor* of red, white and blue had to dominate the composition. Entries thus became programmatic depictions of a female protagonist who was either seated upon, or placed in front of, a large throne, and who held in her hand the symbols of the “Republican trinity”. Such

⁴⁰ Karl Marx: “The June Revolution” in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Collected Works Volume 7*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1977, p147.

⁴¹ T. J. Clark: *The Absolute Bourgeois*, 1973, pp 12 – 15.

⁴² Théophile Thoré: “Salon of 1848”, in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, 2003, p179.

⁴³ Théophile Gautier: “Art in 1848”, *ibid*, p319.

⁴⁴ T. J. Clark: *The Absolute Bourgeois*, 1973, pp 31 – 32.

uniformity provoked the cartoonist's satire, and was greeted with the critic's scorn.⁴⁵

V: Courbet.

To find an artistic expression of 1848 thus entails looking beyond the boundaries of state sponsorship. Indeed, Clark claimed that the true avant-garde of mid nineteenth-century France was populated by those who viewed the tumultuous events of Paris from a distance. Jean-François Millet fled to Barbizon in 1849, Daumier lived "furtively" in *Quai d'Anjou*, Baudelaire claimed to be forever estranged from the "respectable world" by his "tastes and principles", while Gustave Courbet made his most crucial work at Ornans.⁴⁶ Of such works it is Courbet's masterpiece, *The Burial at Ornans* (1849-50), which proves most useful when considering the political tensions inherent to the Second Republic.

The Burial depicts a funeral procession set against a rural landscape, a subject that was far from simplistic. Indeed, images of country society became politically sensitive following February 1848. The elections of 29th May 1849 were key in this context. Though traditionally perceived to be Conservative and loyal to the influence of landowners and "notables", the ballot saw masses of rural voters break their stereotype and support the "democrates-socialistes", the newly formed leftist coalition. This swing created "La France rouge", a haven of Socialism built in response to the impoverishment triggered by wealthy citizens who forged their prosperity in the provinces.

Initially, the Right dismissed this as a temporary shift, but nationally the political stance grew ever closer to the spirit of 1789. Land shortage underpinned this new radicalism. There were simply too many people living in rural districts and not enough farms to support them. As a result, there was a sharp increase in the price of land itself, inviting estates to buy up acres and reap profit. Large farms thus expanded while smallholdings were engulfed: the middle classes grew wealthy on the worker's debasement.⁴⁷ Rather than working their own land, and growing crops that could be used as food or sold to other producers in order to

⁴⁵ T. J. Clark: *The Absolute Bourgeois*, 1973, pp 63 - 64.

⁴⁶ T. J. Clark: *The Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1982, p14.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp 86 – 97.

generate extra income, the peasant would be forced to live as a tenant. Consequently, they would be compelled to transfer a percentage of their produce to the landowner in return for the right to till their earth. Therefore, their toil would supply the wealthy with a stream of saleable commodities, rather than supporting their own subsistence.⁴⁸

Courbet's work derived its intensity from this social climate, with *The Burial* in particular revealing the class struggles of rural life. However, Michael Fried has claimed that while Clark correctly defines the picture as one suffused with political significance, he ultimately fails to explain the precise nature of the painting's impact.⁴⁹ What follows is an attempt to redress this imbalance and reclaim something of *The Burial's* radicalism.

As a canvas the painting was vast, measuring roughly twenty feet in width and touching almost twelve feet in height. Across these dimensions snaked a cortège of over fifty life size figures.⁵⁰ The rural bourgeois populated this crowd and their demeanour betrayed the greed that drove their oppression of the poor. Responding to claims that the painting was "ugly" Champfleury argued that the painter had in fact been faithful to their appearance. Their vile faces, wrinkled skin and hollow eyes were all consequential of their way of life. The pursuit of money, the insatiable need to boost their fragile egos and the petty squabbles that emerged between them and their contemporaries had taken their toll. Thus, for Champleury, by painting an ugly picture Courbet had portrayed the bourgeoisie in their truest state.⁵¹

It is the gravedigger, kneeling beside the freshly dug earth, who represents the poor. Like Courbet's *Stonebreakers* (1849-50) he works the land, but here he possesses a strength that belies his status. While they wait for the corpse to be lowered, the wealthy onlookers are struck by the thought that they too will meet this fate, a realisation to which Bouchon gave poetic description. As he noted, Death offered no observation of social status, and would lead all condemned

⁴⁸ Karl Marx: *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, 1990, p905.

⁴⁹ Michael Fried: *Courbet's Realism*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p117.

⁵⁰ Max Bouchon: "On Courbet's *Stonebreakers* and *Burial at Ornans*", in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, 2003, p365.

⁵¹ Chamfleury (Jules Fleury-Husson): "The Burial at Ornans", *ibid*, p369.

souls in the same macabre dance regardless of the exalted position they may have held in life.⁵²

When that day arrives, the gravedigger will be the capitalist's final link to the living world. Like Charon ferrying souls across the river Styx, he will induct them into the afterlife. Accordingly, he will not just put men to rest, but will bury the worker's master and avenge those to whom circumstance have assigned years of misery and toil. The gravedigger is thus empowered, and assumes authority in the composition. As Bouchon comments, he is the sole figure who commands any semblance of authority in the composition. That he is the only figure to attempt eye contact with the priest, the conductor of this religious ceremony, attests to his fortitude.

By bringing such paintings to the Salon, Courbet effectively transferred class-conflict into the exhibition space. Undoubtedly, this act generated great controversy, leading Champfleury to mock the public outcry against the *The Burial's* inclusion in the Salon of 1850. His satire centred upon the sense of fear that gripped those who had witnessed the canvas, and their subsequent attempts to remove the offending work from public display. Indeed, he described the terror of the conservative visitors who claimed that that Courbet was the child of the 1848 revolution, and as such should be expelled from the gallery.⁵³

Key to such unease was the fact that radicals such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon actively championed Courbet's work. As Benjamin observed, Proudhon sought to integrate the painter's work into his own ideological and political campaigns.⁵⁴ In this context, Courbet's art emerged as a potential catalyst for future acts of social revolt, a banner under which the disaffected and dispossessed could unite once more. To be sure, the Left were quick to identify him as a figurehead of the February revolution and the ideals for which it stood. For example, Benjamin remarks upon a leaflet designed to present the heroes of 1848 to the masses, a publication in which Courbet was shown speaking the following words: humanity shall experience no peace or happiness "until the day the republic sends the son of God back to the carpenter's shop of monsieur his father".⁵⁵ That

⁵² Max Bouchon: "On Courbet's *Stonebreakers* and *Burial at Ornans*", *ibid*, pp 365 – 366.

⁵³ Champfleury (Jules Fleury-Husson): "The Burial at Ornans", *ibid*, pp 367 – 368.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [L4,3], 1999, p413.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*: [p6,3], p817.

the artist was shown uttering such declarations is testament to his standing as a supporter of insurgency, as a man of the people.

In fact, it was Courbet's wish that Paris would one day become a city governed by a "citizen created order", an order that would grant each individual the freedom to pursue his or her own interests.⁵⁶ The radicalism that drove this yearning for an egalitarian society was captured for eternity by a famous caricature. Titled *Actualité*, the sketch shows Courbet standing, palette in hand, amid the rubble of the smashed Vendôme Column, a structure built as a monument to the achievements of Napoleon I. The Commune of 1871 destroyed this statue in a final defiance of the old order, and crucially Courbet would be implicated in – and later imprisoned for – the crime in question.⁵⁷ Accordingly, although such events would be unknown to the bourgeois of 1850 they nevertheless reveal the politics of the man whom Benjamin would call the "great communard painter",⁵⁸ thereby confirming why conservative Parisians had good reason to fear both his presence and his art.

A further explanation of why Courbet's work proved so controversial when exhibited in the French capital can be traced through Steve Edwards' reading of Marx. Although not written in reference to Courbet, the following argument – with its allusions to Mary Shelley – becomes significant when contextualised against *The Burial*.⁵⁹

For Edwards, Shelley's *Frankenstein* offers an important thesis upon on the "class dynamics of fear" in nineteenth century capitalism. Central to this claim is an analogy drawn between Frankenstein's relation to his monster and the social dynamic that connects proletariat and bourgeois. In Edwards' analysis, the capitalist's fate echoes that of Frankenstein because the production processes they initiate will foster a dilemma similar to that endured by the protagonist of Shelley's tale. Like Frankenstein, factory owners will be bound to an ogre from which they will never escape, an ogre that threatens their very existence. As Edwards concludes with reference to Marx, in addition to financial gain the

⁵⁶ Louise Michel, quoted by Jean Cassou: *La Semaine sanlante*, Vendredi, May 22, 1936, in Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, *ibid*, [k2a,6], p791.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the Paris Commune see Karl Marx: "The Civil War In France" in Karl Marx *Selected Writings*, Cambridge, Hackett, 1994, pp 301 – 314.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [K2a,6], p791.

⁵⁹ Steve Edwards: *The Making of English Photography: allegories*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, p288.

bourgeoisie thus produces their own “grave-diggers”. The “possessing class” becomes the “possessed”.⁶⁰

Such claims can be elucidated as follows. If modern manufacture is focused upon the generation of surplus value – which in turn hinges upon the extraction of surplus labour from the worker – and if such feats require the creation of a de-skilled mass of labourers who are transformed from artisans to machine operators, then the very class that perpetuates the evolution of capitalist economy simultaneously holds the potential to instigate its downfall. Indeed, if the proletariat rebel against their employers, then the prosperity they have forged will be destroyed. Furthermore, there is no way in which the factory owner could avoid this possibility, for without the labouring classes – and the labour-power commodity they offer – there can be no surplus value, and hence no profit. As Marx confirmed: the proletariat was both formed by and essential to capitalist accumulation.⁶¹ The entrepreneur is thus fated to conjure the threat of their own decline in tandem with their success. This explanation undoubtedly applies to the French bourgeoisie, for the “classe dangereuse”⁶² – the unruly horde of labourers that the notable citizens feared with such intensity – was their creation, albeit one of economics and not macabre science. Consequently, they too would live in perpetual dread of the society upon which their advancement was founded.

Crucially, the central figure in *The Burial at Ornans* embodied this very danger. Both literally and metaphorically, Courbet’s painting evoked the idea that the bourgeoisie will create their own gravediggers through their exploitation of the poor. In the canvas, the peasant digs the graves of wealthy men because he is obliged to do so by his situation in life. But if he rises up against his masters and the repression fostered by their drive to purchase land – an impulse that has denied him the means of subsistence and compelled him to servitude – then he threatens to assign their business interests a similar fate. Moreover, this situation would not be limited to the countryside and the social systems it sustained. Like the figure patiently waiting beside his pile of freshly dug earth, the masses employed in Parisian industries possessed the potential to condemn their employers through acts of insurgency. Any image that disclosed this state of

⁶⁰ Ibid, p289. The Marx reference is from “The Communist Manifesto”. See *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 1994, p169.

⁶¹ Karl Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, 1990, p930.

⁶² T. J. Clark: *The Image of the People*, 1982, p34.

affairs would thus engender anxiety in the Right, while conversely being appropriated by radicals and revolutionaries alike. Undoubtedly, *The Burial* possessed this power, and therefore threatened to destabilise the state by inciting the people to take arms against their oppressors. However, the capital would soon see attempts to sooth this fear by subduing the spectre of workers' revolt.

VI: Haussmann.

The Second Republic ended in 1851, following Louis Napoleon's December *coup d'état*. The Second Empire was born, yet social tensions between rich and poor remained constant. However, the new regime's response was both elaborate and far-reaching. At its centre was the Second Empire's most ambitious project: the attempt to re-design and re-construct Paris itself. Consequently, the architect Baron Haussmann was commissioned to re-shape the French capital into the image craved by its masters.⁶³ Remarking upon his achievements, Le Corbusier commented that Haussmann gouged great holes through the metropolis and worked with such ferocity that it seemed unlikely that Paris would survive his "surgical" experiments. Yet in spite of these concerns, he concedes that the Baron's "daring and courage" resulted in the city's celebrated beauty.⁶⁴ But the architect's objectives were not solely aesthetic. Crucially, he was also employed to transform Paris into a space that could no longer stage revolution; a city that the workers could not besiege.

As Benjamin avowed, the driving force of Haussmann's project was an attempt to secure the city from the threat of uprising. Specifically, he sought to eradicate any possibility that barricades might one day be constructed in the metropolis. He widened the existing streets in order to hamper anyone wishing to construct a line of defence redolent of those that had perpetuated the February uprising. Furthermore, he constructed new streets designed to offer a short, direct route between the working class regions of Paris and the barracks of soldiers stationed

⁶³ See Anthony Sutcliffe: *The Autumn of Central Paris: The Defeat of Town Planning, 1850 – 1970*, London, Edward Arnold, 1970, pp 11 – 42, for a discussion of the social and political factors that influenced the re-development of Paris in the Second Empire.

⁶⁴ Le Corbusier quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, [E5a,6], 1999, p133.

in the capital. Thus if any unrest were to spark it could be quelled with speed and precision.⁶⁵

A more satirical explanation of such projects emerges through suggestions that the decision to widen the streets was “necessitated by the crinoline”,⁶⁶ yet this proposition is not as frivolous as it seems. Although superficially different, the pursuit of fashion and the preservation of civil order share one key characteristic: both are concerns of the wealthy. As such, their twin role in shaping the new city confirms how the rise of the bourgeoisie was inscribed upon Paris, acre after acre, through Haussmann’s “architectural and social reorganisation”. To be sure, the “Artist of Demolition”⁶⁷ sought to divide the capital according to class boundaries, a process that saw the uprooting and relocation of the proletariat from their traditional homes in the *quartiers* of central Paris to the northeastern districts of Belleville and Menilmontant.⁶⁸

Hausmann’s railways, aqueducts, sanitation systems, gas lighting, public transportation, opera houses, cemeteries and tree-lined promenades necessitated the eviction of an estimated 350,000 people. Such individuals were lured with the promise of jobs in the factories that had been relocated to the “Banlieue”, the landscape van Gogh portrayed as the melancholic realm of rag pickers, gypsies and washerwomen.⁶⁹ Segregating rich and poor in this manner created “active” and “passive” zones within the city itself, splitting its geography into the “privileged spaces” where decisions were made and the submissive districts compelled to follow such rulings.⁷⁰ This scheme began a chain reaction that would transform the economy of the capital.

Prior to the embellishments, the economy of the *quartier* had defined Parisian industry. It was a system in which the workshops supporting various production processes were gathered in single streets, enabling the price of labour and raw materials to remain constant. As Clark comments, “business and sociability were bound together”. Each district would have a wholesaler or *négociant*, who imported goods and products from *quartiers* across the city, effectively making

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin: “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, 2002, p42.

⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [E5a,8], 1999, p133.

⁶⁷ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p90. (The “Artist of Demolition” refers to Haussmann.)

⁶⁸ Kristin Ross: *The Emergence of Social Space*, 1988, p41.

⁶⁹ T. J. Clark: *The Painting of Modern Life*, 1999, pp 32 - 40.

⁷⁰ Kristin Ross: *The Emergence of Social Space*, 1988, p41.

him the equivalent of a bourgeois shopkeeper. These communities were a characteristic image of old Paris. However, Haussmann's clearances intruded upon and replaced such networks, homogenizing the city's businesses by building a society in which the notion of individual producers became obsolete.⁷¹

The 'Grand Magasins de Nouveautés' were crucial in this context. Using money generated by "property speculation", Haussmann lined his new streets with large department stores readily equipped to accommodate articles produced en-masse. These buildings provided natural outlets for the intensively manufactured goods generated by capitalism. They made bartering redundant, introduced systems of rapid turnover, and transformed the shop floor into a space where the consumer was prompted and invited by the commodity. By the mid 1860's, the majority of Parisian trade was housed within their walls. The craftsmen who remained in the *quartiers* thus faced extensive competition from the imported goods and cheap labour that flooded Paris via Haussmann's new streets, likewise from the burgeoning systems of collective labour housed in the factories of the Banlieue. To find an outlet for their wares, the artisans' only option would be to seek contracts with the new stores. But once employed, they would be compelled to use the low quality materials provided for them by the "agents" of the Grand Magasins, and accept the long hours and standardised pay dictated by the same parties. Crucially, these conditions generated surplus labour and hence goods with exchange values greater than the cost of their creation. Further division and mechanization of production followed in order to increase profit margins, fostering a climate that eventually subsumed the old way of life.⁷²

For Edouard Fournier, the term "boulevard" was itself indicative of this transformation. Discussing the etymology of the word he claimed that it was a mutation of the word *bouleversement*, meaning "commotion" or "upheaval".⁷³ Therefore, to bathe the capital in the light of prosperity, Haussmann created an illusory vision of equality that masked the vast profits private investors gleaned from his schemes.⁷⁴

⁷¹ T. J. Clark: *The Painting of Modern Life*, 1999, p52.

⁷² Ibid, pp 52 – 57. Also, see Peter McPhee: *A Social History of France, 1780 – 1880*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp 197 – 220, for an overview of the transformed conditions of urban life that developed during the Second Empire.

⁷³ Edouard Fournier: *Chroniques et legends des rues de Paris*, Paris, 1864, p16, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, [E9,1], 1999, p140.

⁷⁴ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p89.

Paris thus became a stage on which Louis Napoleon's promotion of "investment capital" could enjoy free reign⁷⁵, a transformation embodied by the world exhibition of 1867, which symbolized the Second Empire's ascendancy.⁷⁶ Moreover, by openly intending to improve the health and morality conditions of the workers,⁷⁷ such showcases performed political functions that harmonised with the need to preserve social order.

Indeed, academics have traced a dialogue between the economic transformations initiated by Haussmann and the Second Empire's drive to nullify civil unrest. As Buck-Morss contends, the Empire used the world fairs to present industry and technology as "mythic powers" imbued with the potential to create futures of "world peace, class harmony, and abundance". Hence they offered the masses glimpses of a new and better reality. Yet because the utopia conveyed by such spectacles would be achieved through economics rather than revolution, its dissemination throughout society would effectively numb the dangers of class conflict.⁷⁸ Buck-Morss identifies a key example of this effect. Echoing Benjamin's claim that such events were conceived as entertainment for the working class, she notes that up to four hundred thousand labourers attended the *Exposition* of 1867. But unlike the other visitors they received free tickets and were thus encouraged to enter the place where they could behold the marvellous products that their labour had created – but which they could not afford to own – and gaze in wonderment at the new machines that would soon render their craftsmanship obsolete.⁷⁹

Therefore, the automation and division of labour that flourished following the dissolution of the *quartier* economy not only estranged the workers from the products of their craft, but also allowed the endless arrays of goods housed by the exhibitions and Grands Magasins to be returned to their makers as symbols of the progress miraculously generated by the new age. Haussmann's Paris became a mirage of magical objects and stunning fashions, all of which appeared to be supernaturally conjured from thin air.⁸⁰ Consequently, labourers were compelled

⁷⁵ Walter Benjamin: "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century", 2002, p42.

⁷⁶ Ibid, pp 37 – 38.

⁷⁷ Kristin Ross: *The Emergence of Social Space*, 1988, p15.

⁷⁸ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, pp 86 – 87.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p86.

⁸⁰ Graeme Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, pp 123 – 125.

to overlook the fact that the self-perpetuating utopia before them was driven by their own toil, and focus instead upon the wondrous era in which they lived.

Furthermore, the exhibitions contained physical representations of the model worker this situation would create. In the 1867 event, Le Play designed a section called *Petits Métiers*, in which both male and female craftspeople could be seen making commodities such as lace, artificial flowers and chocolate. In organising these attractions, Le Play was keen to express the independence and autonomy of such people, and to emphasise that their trades could employ whole family units.⁸¹ This last point was key to the overall image he sought to convey. As Ross observes, his goal was to create an image of a model worker for the newly industrialised society, a feat he attempted by combining the morality and family values of the rural labourer with the skills and energy possessed by their urban counterpart.⁸²

Reconstructing the worker as religious, moralistic and productive figure can be thus viewed as an attempt to ensure that the proletariat extolled middle-class values rather than opposing them. Such character traits were sold to the masses in an attempt to purge them of *sublimisme*, the disease of insubordination, drunkenness and idleness that threatened to sow seeds of revolution in the labourer's consciousness. With these poisons eradicated, the public would be happy to work, earn and buy back the results of their toil.⁸³

Analogous ideas reverberate through the "Mirror File" of the *Arcades Project*, in which Benjamin points towards a similar exchange between worker, economy and society.⁸⁴ He compared the glasslike surface of Parisian streets, the illuminated shops and cafes that flanked them, and the shining walls that decorated their interiors, to an ancient sorcery designed to lull people into "seductive bazaars".⁸⁵ In this "city of mirrors",⁸⁶ workers would see their likeness wherever they went. Yet because such reflections obscured the social realities of manufacture, it would be returned to them as a "commodity fixated" consumer rather than a producer.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Kristin Ross: *The Emergence of Social Space*, 1988, p15.

⁸² Ibid, p15.

⁸³ Ibid, pp 16 – 17.

⁸⁴ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p103.

⁸⁵ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [R2a,2], 1999, p541.

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin: "The Arcades of Paris" in *The Arcades Project*, 1999, p877.

⁸⁷ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, pp 103 – 104.

Such experiences are captured by Baudelaire's prose poem 'The Eyes of the Poor' (1864), which describes an impoverished family who gaze at a sparkling café, resplendent with "blindingly white walls" and a "dazzling expanse of mirrors".

The prose relays, in particular, the wonder and amazement the spectacle engenders in the onlookers. In the work, the father looks upon the establishment and his eyes become captivated by the majesty displayed before him. The eyes of his eldest son are similarly charmed. He badly wants to enter, but his impulse is tempered by recognition of the fact that a poor child such as he would surely be turned away from such a place. Finally, the youngest child is described as being simply too awestruck by the façade to express any rational reaction.⁸⁸

The sense of longing such descriptions evoke suggests how the promise of consumption, of owning the signs of advancement wrought by their own hand, captivated the masses and announced itself as a mode of development against which civil insurgence became archaic. Even though the father acknowledges the inequality that allowed such façades to prosper – a realisation evident in his claim that the cafe is decorated with "the gold of the poor" – he is nevertheless entranced. Consequently, such accounts reveal how – like the joyous illusion conveyed by the World Exhibitions in which man-made goods appeared as gifts from 'outer space' and the consumer became an interstellar traveller – the public encountered but a flickering spectre of reality, not a concrete actuality of everyday life. Any disaffection arising from the economic revolutions of Haussmann's metropolis would be divested from this mirage, thereby domesticating the mob and extinguishing the revolutionary spark that Courbet's art threatened to ignite.⁸⁹ Such would be the legacy of the cultural phantasmagoria, of the dream world formed by a city that masked the social relations of production.

⁸⁸ Charles Baudelaire: "The Eyes of the Poor" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p68.

⁸⁹ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p193.

VII: Allegory.

As ‘The Eyes of the Poor’ suggests, Baudelaire’s work was entwined with the sensory and experiential landscape of Haussmann’s metropolis.⁹⁰ Benjamin viewed the poet in this exact context. Following Marx, he defined cultural artefacts as evocations of “underlying economic patterns”, as discourses against which the interplay between the economic base and ideological superstructure might be subject to critical enquiry.⁹¹ The beginnings of this idea take shape in the *Arcades Project*. Here Benjamin anticipates a debate that will exceed Marx’s initial link between “economy and culture” by investigating not only the “economic origins of culture” but also the expression of the economic patterns in the products of creative labour. Undoubtedly, Baudelaire’s work could be read in such terms. Indeed, reflecting on the evolution of nineteenth century art, Benjamin suggested that the middle decades of that era were subject to a profound transformation. As he argued, this change hinged on the fact that the commodity form became directly imposed upon the artwork. For Benjamin, this rupture was most keenly felt in the practice of lyric poetry. Thus he argued that the unique achievement of *Les Fleurs du Mal* was Baudelaire’s ability to respond to the conditions fostered by a new economic climate with a volume of poems.⁹²

Benjamin’s interpretation of Baudelaire hinged upon a dialectical exchange between allegory and the commodity, or as Graeme Gilloch put it, a “relationship between poetic form and industrial product”.⁹³ This focus likewise underpins the *exposé* of 1935, in which Baudelaire is described as an “allegorical genius” who makes Paris the subject of lyric poetry. But Benjamin also believed that the gaze the allegorical genius cast upon the city was born of “profound alienation”. Key to such claims is the interplay he established between Baudelaire and the figure of the *flâneur*, the nineteenth century stroller who “goes botanizing on the asphalt”.⁹⁴ As Benjamin argued: the allegorical gaze *belonged* to the *flâneur*.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p177.

⁹¹ Graeme Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, pp 134 – 135.

⁹² Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [J60,6], pp 336 – 337.

⁹³ Graeme Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, p135.

⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin: “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003 p19.

⁹⁵ Walter Benjamin: “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939”, 1999, p21.

The *flâneur* was the observer of modern life, but he was no pedestrian; he insisted upon “elbow room” and refused to sacrifice the life enjoyed by a “gentlemen of leisure”.⁹⁶ Abandoning himself unto the city, he would encounter sensations akin to drunkenness.⁹⁷ Benjamin famously gave this experience an idealised veneer, likening the pleasure born of the *flâneur*’s leisurely stroll to that of intoxication. In his interpretation, each step would enhance the *flâneur*’s curiosity about what his journey may uncover. Thus the lure of the capital’s bars and bistros, an attraction that might have otherwise have enticed an individual off the pavement, would give way to the magnetic pull of finding out what might lie hidden behind a distant street corner.⁹⁸

Buck-Morss places Baudelaire’s methodologies in this context, avowing that he composed his work “during his *flânerie*”. As Nadar notes, the poet would move through Paris with a manner at once anxious and feline. Speaking of one particular encounter, the photographer observed his compatriot walking “like a cat”, his uneven footsteps delicately selecting their route as if his feet were walking not on solid ground, but on eggshells.⁹⁹ Such movements were essential to Baudelaire’s craft. He transformed the experience of drifting into a form of creative labour.¹⁰⁰ This is voiced most strikingly in ‘The Sun’ (1857), a work that contains Baudelaire’s famous description of composing verses as he paced the city streets, stumbling over words as if they were paving stones.¹⁰¹

The arcades allowed similar journeys to be rehearsed. The vogue for walking tortoises through their “marble-panelled passageways” set the pace for *flânerie*’s nonchalant gait.¹⁰² They offered the idler a safe haven from traffic that would be without equal until Haussmann’s wide avenues replaced the city’s narrow streets. Once constructed however, these boulevards became the *flâneur*’s habitat. As one account put it, the large streets and wide sidewalks provided new locations

⁹⁶ Walter Benjamin: “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, 2003, p30.

⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin: “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939”, 1999, p21.

⁹⁸ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [M1,3], 1999, p417.

⁹⁹ Nadar, cited by Firmin Maillard in *La Cité des intellectuels*, Paris 1905, p362, quoted by Walter Benjamin: *ibid*, [Ja,3], 1999, p230.

¹⁰⁰ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p185.

¹⁰¹ Charles Baudelaire: “The Sun” in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p169.

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [M3,8], 1999, p422.

for the joyous *flânerie* that was previously confined to the arcades.¹⁰³

Accordingly, the figure who drifted through the city would look upon the signs of businesses and establishments as a wealthy citizen might view a painting that hangs in their private quarters.¹⁰⁴

Through such explorations, Baudelaire would have gazed upon the mass-produced object. As Benjamin reasoned: the *flâneur* was a figure who came to empathise with the commodity, and through that experience would open an empathic relationship with exchange-value itself.¹⁰⁵ Like the worker, the *flâneur* would encounter his reflection in shop windows. He would see in such displays “the fulfilment of his desires” and hence become the ideal consumer.¹⁰⁶ As he paced the city, Baudelaire became an exemplar of this role. But he did not just observe. On the contrary, Benjamin would contend that he “empathized himself into the soul of the commodity”. A feat enabled by a “mimetic capacity” that mirrored the commodity’s ability to adopt multiple meanings.¹⁰⁷

The capacity in question was captured by Courbet’s portrait of the poet, a work that stands as unique in the artist’s oeuvre. Indeed, the painting negates visual realism in favour of a blurred effect, a technique consciously employed to capture the sitter’s chameleonic character.¹⁰⁸ As Benjamin observed, Baudelaire’s physiognomy was akin to that of a mime, prompting Courbet to bemoan the difficulties of portraying a subject whose appearance changed daily.¹⁰⁹ The enigmatic quality of the final image results, no doubt, from these concerns, from Baudelaire’s ability to assume different guises.

To understand how the commodity performed similar feats, it is necessary to consider the concept of allegory in greater detail. In allegory, the themes or motifs engaged by works of art evoke something beyond that to which they initially seem to refer. Allegorical works possess a supplementary meaning that the artist has consciously created by developing a representational system whereby the selected subject matter is used to convey seemingly unrelated ideas

¹⁰³ Edmond Beaupaire: *Paris d’hier et d’aujourd’hui: La Chronique des rues*, Paris, 1900, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades project*, [A1a,1], 1999, p32.

¹⁰⁴ Walter Benjamin: “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, 2003, p19.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [M17a,2], 1999, p448.

¹⁰⁶ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p104.

¹⁰⁷ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, pp 186 – 187.

¹⁰⁸ T.J. Clark: *The Image of the People*, 1982, pp 74 – 76.

¹⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [J57a,4], 1999, p333.

or concepts.¹¹⁰ Benjamin applied this concept to the commodity, claiming that it becomes an allegorical object precisely because it emerges from a production system whereby the exchange-value of the artefact replaces its intended use value and hence its original meaning.¹¹¹ He continued in this vein, avowing that the debasement that marks objects that are removed from their original meaning and, through allegorical depiction, used to signify something else, is analogous to the debasement that occurs when an object is cast as a commodity. Much like the effects of allegorical substitution, such forms are subject to ruination inasmuch as they are denied their intended purpose and reconfigured into items designed to perpetuate the valorisation of capital.¹¹²

Yet as Buck-Morss has reasoned, because allegory ruins things by abstracting them from their original meaning, Benjamin came to identify allegorical vision as a technique that would be employed by the artist only as a “cognitive imperative”.¹¹³ That imperative would be the artistic expression of realities imbued with a transience that mirrored the destruction enacted by allegorical depiction. Indeed, Benjamin avowed that the essence of allegorical illustration – which “views its existence, as it does art, under the sign of fragmentation and ruin”¹¹⁴ – would be valid only in periods marked by a sense of decline.¹¹⁵ In other words, allegory was a technique that enabled the retransmission of discord and disunity.¹¹⁶ Therefore, we can reason that poets did not become allegorists by choice. On the contrary, they were compelled to do so by certain historical and social conditions.¹¹⁷

Yet if the cultures of specific eras possessed a fragmentary character that rendered them befitting of allegorical depiction, then why did Paris strike Baudelaire in this manner? The city facing him was that of the Second Empire, a place synonymous with financial prosperity and industrial growth. For the poet, however, this landscape was far from radiant. On the contrary, it engendered a general *ennui*.¹¹⁸ This is voiced most strikingly in ‘The Swan’ (1861). Here,

¹¹⁰ Graeme Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, p135.

¹¹¹ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [J67,2], 1999, p347.

¹¹² Walter Benjamin: “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939”, 1999, p22.

¹¹³ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p168.

¹¹⁴ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [J59a,6], 1999, pp 330 – 331.

¹¹⁵ Walter Benjamin quoted by Susan Buck-Morss in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p161.

¹¹⁶ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p199.

¹¹⁷ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p168.

¹¹⁸ Adrian Rifkin: *Street Noises*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993, p3.

Paris is presented as a source of melancholy, and the cities buildings – both old and new alike – are interpreted as structures imbued with an allegorical nature.¹¹⁹

The economic system that re-shaped the city provoked such lamentation. As Benjamin put it, in Baudelaire's verse the commodity form becomes the social dimension of allegorical perception.¹²⁰ Like allegory, the commodity was entwined with transience and decline. Its production was driven by the fickle tastes of fashion, meaning each new item was fated to become archaic.¹²¹ 'The Seven Old Men' (1861) illustrates this idea. Ostensibly, the poem details a state of anxiety arising from repetitious encounters with a social "type" of modernity: the sudden, "seven fold" appearance of a horrific old man who appears as always identical in his "multiplicity".¹²² However, this motif also evokes the cycle of commodity production in the age of high capitalism, which centres on the unending repetition of the new.¹²³

Baudelaire's poem evokes a journey through a forlorn district of the city, the details of which he describes to the reader. A foul stream about which nothing is salubrious flows through the space, and the houses that flank the street seem to grow taller amid the fog that blankets the decrepit locale. Suddenly, without warning, an aged man dressed in ragged clothes looms into view. A sinister glint animates his eyes, giving his gaze a cold, forbidding edge. His chilling appearance is completed by his twisted, deformed body, which he supports with the aid of a stick. Almost instantaneously this man is joined by his double, a figure of equally frightening dress, appearance and demeanour. Another twin follows, similarly bitter and foreboding. Then another. Eventually, seven exact clones stagger across the landscape, prompting the poet to question what hellish forces might be responsible for such a menacing sight.¹²⁴

The sensation conveyed is one of transformed temporality, an experience that anticipates everyday life in Hausmann's city. As discussed above, to preserve its promise of progress the Second Empire paraded a continuous stream of innovations, each more enticing than the last. Yet like images cast by a magic

¹¹⁹ Charles Baudelaire: "The Swan (*for Victor Hugo*)" in *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, p175.

¹²⁰ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [J59,10], 1999, p335.

¹²¹ Graham Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, pp 136 – 137.

¹²² Walter Benjamin: "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939", 1999, p22.

¹²³ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 1991, p191.

¹²⁴ Charles Baudelaire: "The Seven Old Men", in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, pp 177 – 181.

lantern, they were condemned to a fleeting existence, tied to a vicious circle of novelty and replacement. It is the *flâneur's* encounter with this endless, fragmented procession that the 'Seven Old Men' evokes. To be sure, the abruptness with which the protagonists loom into sight is suggestive of Marx's reading of mass industry, of the dreamscape in which goods appear and fade as if from nowhere.

Moreover, the stark resemblance between each monstrous figure is redolent of the world that regurgitates the new without any relief. This relentless updating would yield a malaise under which everything seemed the same. As Benjamin reflected: the "dreaming collective" is isolated from history, events pass before it as forever identical and "always new".¹²⁵ Undoubtedly, Baudelaire's depiction of the disquiet fostered by an experience of ceaseless repetition anticipates this exact situation. As such, his use of allegory can be ascribed a socio-economic base, as the disintegration suggested by such techniques reflects the impermanence fostered by commodity capitalism.¹²⁶ The progression from the Arcades, to the International Exhibitions and on to the department stores may have been redolent of modernisation, but it also rendered the once modern obsolete. The opening stanza of the 'Seven Old Men' – which speaks of ghosts that haunt the stroller by light of day – might thus be interpreted as a reference to the past innovations that have been cast aside by the city's endless refashioning, and exist for the consumer only as phantoms from some distant time. However, this environment would impact not only upon the lyric; it would also influence the painter's craft. It is by exploring such practice that the crises facing the auratic may be engaged.

VIII: *Monsieur G.*

Crucially, the booming economy evoked by 'The Seven Old Men' produced not only a swift flow of fashions, it also fostered hordes of frenzied consumers who flocked to the capital and crowded its streets, each pursuing goods

¹²⁵ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [S2,1], 1999, p546.

¹²⁶ Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, 2000, p199.

emblematic of the prosperity pledged by the Empire.¹²⁷ As stores grew in size and splendour so too would these masses swell, forming throngs amid which everyday encounters were divested of continuity. Accordingly, empirical reality became a chaotic mess of impressions upon which the beholder could grant only passing attention.¹²⁸

Against this background, we can identify how the character of the commodity, that is to say its transient, allegorical nature, came to shape the conditions of the city. Just as commodities lacked permanence, so too would life in a consumer economy be comprised entirely of momentary encounters: the experience of ruin fostered the ruination of experience. Support for such claims comes from Benjamin's assertion that if the experience of allegory is the "experience of eternal transience",¹²⁹ then allegories represent "that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century".¹³⁰ Clearly, this climate posed challenges to the figure seeking the spirit of the age. The era of ephemerality fostered a glance attuned to its fragmentation. As Baudelaire reasoned, the modern world is marked by a speed of movement and change that necessitates a similar speed of execution from the artist. Crucially, an exemplar of this project would be found in the water-colourist Constantin Guys, a figure Baudelaire defined as the painter who captured the "passing moment" and all the "suggestions of eternity" it may contain.¹³¹

To introduce "*Monsieur G.*" Baudelaire invoked the prose of Edgar Allan Poe, and in particular 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840). Here Poe writes of a man sitting by the window of a coffee house, a "convalescent" whose gaze has become absorbed the spectacle of the passing crowd, who is lost within "the turmoil of thought that surrounds him".¹³²

Significantly, Baudelaire claimed that Guys shared this character's unquenchable interest in the events daily life, a condition that bestows upon him a child-like quality. To be sure, Baudelaire claimed that both child and

¹²⁷ Théodore Muret: *L'Histoire par le théâtre*, vol. 2, pp 225 – 226, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, [A2a,7], 1999, p39.

¹²⁸ Graham Gilloch: *Myth and Metropolis*, 1996, pp 143 – 147.

¹²⁹ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [J67,4], 1999, p348.

¹³⁰ Ibid: [J55,13], p328.

¹³¹ Charles Baudelaire: "The Painter of Modern Life" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, London, Phaidon, 1964, pp 4 – 5.

¹³² Ibid, pp 5 – 7.

convalescent possessed the ability to become intently engrossed in things regardless of how trivial they might seem. A child, he reasons, will be fascinated by the ordinary and mundane because for them everything is fantastic, they see everything as if for the first time. Genius, Baudelaire continues, might be thought of as the ability to recover this sense of wonder at will. In other words, a genius is a figure able to unite the infant's joy and enthusiasm for the common place with an adult consciousness able to order, analyse and express the sheer mass of impressions that may be assimilated in any given day. These characteristics unite in Monsieur G. For Baudelaire, he is a "man child", a figure for whom the empirical world is a constant source of delight and marvel.¹³³

Undoubtedly, this man would be the ultimate *flâneur*, the "passionate spectator" who would "be at the centre of the world" and yet be hidden from it. Baudelaire compared him to "a mirror as vast as the crowd itself", a "kaleidoscope gifted with a consciousness" who happily watches as the subtleties and events of life flow past him. His greatest skill would be the ability to capture this current in his art,¹³⁴ a gift to which Baudelaire would famously attest.

He describes Guys working long into the night, endlessly striving to translate the brief, ephemeral impression he has recorded with a swift glance of his eyes onto the crisp, unmarked sheet of paper before him. His pen and brush are locked in a whirl of chaotic activity, a frenzy born of the fear that if he stops working even for a moment he might fail to capture an image or event. Yet when he does manage to record daily life, he does so in a composition that transcends any notion of naturalism or beauty. As Baudelaire's account implies, the art of Monsieur G achieves something far greater than a mere record of the everyday. On the contrary, he evokes and distils the phantasmagoria of modernity for all to behold.¹³⁵

As such we might conclude that the speed of Guys' glance, the swiftness of his mark making, and the transience of modern life are perfectly attuned. Faced with a world that is perpetually new, his gift is to see "*everything in a state of newness*" and capture each and every novelty; a skill evident in the sense of rapid execution that pervades *A Family Walking in the Park*. A similar project can be

¹³³ Ibid, pp 7 – 9.

¹³⁴ Ibid, pp 9 – 11.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p12.

discerned in Manet's wish to become a "spontaneist", a figure able to transcribe the fleeting events of the everyday in his art.¹³⁶ It is this declaration that will structure what follows. Specifically, I want to argue that it is the work Manet made in response to the social climate of high capitalism that allows us to view changes in creative practice as indicative of the aura's decline. But to expound this claim first demands focus upon a particular reading of the artist's oeuvre, specifically that advanced by Fried, which centres upon notions of temporality in painting.

For Fried, there are two contrasting approaches to representations of temporality, each based upon specific properties of painting. The first is that of "duration", a conception tied to the notion that paintings are "material objects" that change little over time. The artist working in this context will select subjects possessed of a similar unchanging nature: the still life, the landscape, or images of people who appear to be captivated, asleep or unmoving. In Fried's analysis, this thematic became a model for Western realist art, one allied to the "implied temporality of the representation and the actual (or 'material') temporality of painting itself". Opposing this strategy, however, is the "temporal mode of instantaneousness", which consigns itself to an alternative reading of paintings materiality. Namely, that easel painting is nothing but surface, that the entirety of that surface faces the beholder, and therefore that every detail and motif contained within a composition can be read in a single glance. It is within this latter paradigm that Manet's work belongs.¹³⁷ Yet to contextualise this claim against notions of the auratic, it is crucial to describe the mode of reception Manet eschews in greater detail. This can be achieved by focus upon the work of Caspar David Friedrich.

IX: Aura.

Reflecting upon acts of beholding, Benjamin argued that "painting invites the spectator to contemplation".¹³⁸ The art of Friedrich operates in precisely such

¹³⁶ Edouard Manet: *Manet by Himself*, London, Macdonald Illustrated, 2004, p202.

¹³⁷ Michael Fried: *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*, London and Chicago, The Chicago University Press, 1996, p291.

¹³⁸ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, 2003, p267.

terms. As Richard Wollhiem observed, Friedrich sought to engage the beholder in immersive perception, encouraging them to become an “internal spectator” in the painting itself. In this context, pictorial space would cease to be an external phenomenon, becoming instead a sequence of mental images accessed through the imagination.¹³⁹ Corporeal projection was likewise important to Benjamin, who reasoned that: “A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it”.¹⁴⁰

To explore such claims, Wollhiem distinguished two modes of imagination. The first, *central imagination*, referred to an event visualised from the perspective of a specific figure. The mental images formed through this act could be thought of as “occupied”, or “perspectival” as they originate from the viewpoint of a particular subject. The second, *A-central imagination*, represents the opposite of this conception. It describes a situation that is not visualised from the perspective of a particular subject or beholder, and which thus unfolds in a “frieze-like” manner.

For Wollhiem, central imagination was key to the beholder becoming an internal spectator in the picture space, but for this process to advance the viewer had to select a “protagonist”. That is, a character already present in the painting, a figure able to see the composition’s every detail, and who thus supplies the beholder’s imagination with an occupied viewpoint that can be used to explore the image. The selected person can be anyone, but once chosen they must be imagined from the inside, meaning the observer must endow them with a “repertoire” of memories and feelings, perceptions and thoughts. This “inner life” is crucial as it represents the frame through which the subject must climb if they are to enter the work.¹⁴¹

But in order to project a repertoire onto the protagonist the viewer has to first access the “initial repertoire” created by the artist. Such information provides the basis of the “perceiving, thinking, feeling” character imagined by the beholder.¹⁴² However, this does not mean that the protagonist must be a figure that is physically represented in the painting. On the contrary, a person who is invisible,

¹³⁹ Richard Wollhiem: *Painting as an Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1998, pp 101 – 103.

¹⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p268.

¹⁴¹ Richard Wollhiem: *Painting as an Art*, 1998, pp 129 – 130.

¹⁴² Ibid: p130.

or whose presence is only implied could fulfil the role, as Friedrich's art suggests.

Friedrich composed many paintings from a high viewpoint; a perspective occupied by what Wollhiem calls "the nature-artist of early-nineteenth century pietism". This figure stands removed from the events of empirical life, a detachment that allows him to engage nature through a "profound and devout contemplation". As such, we might identify him as one who follows Baudelaire and savours the harmonious moment before dusk when flowers impart their perfume like sensors, and then gazes in silent melancholy as the sun begins to drown in its "dark congealing blood".¹⁴³

Clearly this was an experience with which Friedrich identified, and he wanted to enact similar connections for the beholder. The 1832 painting *The Large Enclosure near Dresden* is typical of this project. Here the landscape is seen from an elevated position, to extent that the curve of the earth's surface can be discerned. This angle of vision introduces the perceptual register of the nature-artist into the imagination of the beholder,¹⁴⁴ casting that figure as the work's protagonist. With this link established, the subject channels the inner life of the nature artist and uses this information to become an inner spectator in the picture, an act that subsequently influences how the viewer receives the work. As Wollhiem comments, the nature artist attempts to understand the "secrets" of nature, secrets that can only be interpreted through "humility, patience, careful observation and long hours of dedicated, painstaking toil". By engaging *The Large enclosure* from this figure's perspective, the observer is thus compelled to similar acts of lingering contemplation.¹⁴⁵

However, Wolhiem's account also suggests that *The Large Enclosure* conveys a further category of experience to the viewer, namely that of aura. As shown above in the introduction, the auratic describes a mode of perceptual experience patterned upon the beholder's response to the sacred, the magical, or the beautiful. An encounter with forms possessing such qualities draws the subject into a state of immersive meditation, through which the "atmosphere" or "plus of appearance" conveyed by the object of contemplation – the quality Adorno

¹⁴³ Charles Baudelaire: "The Harmony of Evening", in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, p97.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Wollhiem: *Painting as an Art*, 1998, pp 130 – 136.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p133.

identifies as that which transcends the experience of empirical life – can be engaged.¹⁴⁶ The mode of reception fostered by this act, which can be understood as an act of looking that disavows any objective means, creates what could be thought of as a reverie in which all sense of time is lost, in which the subject becomes fully immersed in the spectacle before them.¹⁴⁷ It is this exchange that forms the strange weave of space and time associated with the true experience of genuine aura.

Crucially, it was meditation upon the transcendent splendour of nature that provided Benjamin's central metaphor of auratic experience. In Benjamin's thesis, the beholder looks upon the mysteries of nature and is lost unto a lingering mediation upon the scene before them. This represents the precise context in which Friedrich's nature artist attempts to unlock the divine secrets of the natural world, to engage the transcendent plus of appearance conveyed by the scene that confronts him. It follows, therefore, that if this figure provides the observer's "window" into *The Large Enclosure*, then when the observer channels the inner life of the protagonist and becomes the inner spectator, the auratic contemplation of nature suggested by his "repertoire" becomes the frame through which the picture is viewed. In other words, if the nature artist experiences nature auratically, then the beholder will be compelled to receive Friedrich's painting through the state of reverent contemplation crucial to the auratic. As such, the picture reflects Adorno's claim that the auratic experience enacted by works of art parallels the tranquil melancholia arising from the perceptual immersion created when the beauty of nature is not viewed as a means for the observer's practical ends.

X: Manet.

It is precisely this immersive, meditative interaction that Manet's art usurps. To illustrate this claim Fried refers to the painter's 1863 masterpiece: *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, and the derision it attracted. The canvas is set in the shaded setting of a wooded landscape. A series of trees guides the viewer's eye into the image, and

¹⁴⁶ See above, pages 11 – 12.

¹⁴⁷ Diarmuid Costello: "Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today", in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, London, Continuum, 2005, pp 172 – 173.

their foliage almost seems to surround the figures who provide the picture's point of focus. In the foreground are positioned two young men, and a semi-reclining female nude who gazes out towards the beholder. An upturned basket of food rests at her side, as if to illustrate the remnants of the meal that give the canvas its name. Behind this group we see a second female, who seems to have just emerged from a nearby lake or river, and appears to be drying herself at its edge.

For Emile Zola, this work represented an artistic achievement to which all painters should aspire,¹⁴⁸ but public opinion was less favourable. As one commentator scathingly put it, Manet's violent colour pierced the beholder's eye like a blade, and his figures looked as if they had been roughly cut out by hand, then strewn across the composition in a haphazard fashion.¹⁴⁹ Critics were particularly appalled by the artist's handling of tone, notably his juxtaposition of the pale, featureless skin of the female protagonist against the dark clothes of her male companions. Equal outrage accompanied Manet's decision to place both parties upon a vivid background of "acid green" grass. But what was absent from such scorn, Fried contends, is the realisation that such techniques enforce a state of rapid perception that influences not only how the beholder views the portrayed figures, but also their reception of the canvas as a whole.¹⁵⁰

Thus for Fried, Manet's choice to work upon a plain white or pale coloured canvas – a decision that would negate the "dark-ground painting" that permits artists to convey subtle details of light and shade – can be identified as a practice that would not only account for his "unorthodox rendering of form", but would also foster the sense of "temporal immediacy" with which the observer reads his art.¹⁵¹ This last point can be expounded in relation to Courbet. As Marc de Montifaud observed in the Salon of 1867, the viewer of Courbet's "dark-ground forest landscapes" is initially shocked by its denseness. But as one slowly looks into the canvas, these "masses of shadows detach themselves in an illumination that comes from the depths of the wood". This sensation continues from the pictures depths to its outermost planes, until all its details are revealed.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Emile Zola: "Edouard Manet", in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, 2003, p561.

¹⁴⁹ *Letters d'un bourgeois de Paris*, *La Gazette de France*, July 21, 1863 quoted by Michael Fried in *Manet's Modernism*, 1996, p294.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Fried: *Manet's Modernism*, 1996. p294.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p294.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, pp 294 – 295. The Montifaud reference is taken from the writer's "salon de 1867" in *L'artiste*, May 1, 1867.

Fried locates a similar sensation in *The Burial*, arguing that its compositional structure indicates the artist's attempt to imaginatively enter the picture. Key to this claim is the personage of Max Bouchon, the second hatless figure positioned at the very end of the funeral procession. Courbet does more than "identify" with the image of his friend, he projects himself "as if corporeally" into the painted likeness of Bouchon. In justifying this claim, Fried points to the foreground figure of the choirboy who stands roughly parallel to Bouchon. The boy in question holds a "brass holy-water stoup" or *bénitier*, from which water will be sprinkled onto the open grave. Fried interprets this vessel as a metaphorical representation of the painter's brush or palette knife, noting that its French name is a *goupillon*, which means brush. A particular variety of *goupillon* was even manufactured in brush-like form. This connection directs Courbet's vision towards the crucifix bearer positioned immediately above the boy, a man who looks out of the canvas and focuses on a point where the artist would have sat as he painted. However, the artist does not return his gaze. He directs it to the figure stood behind him, who happens to be Bouchon, the target of Courbet's projection. The result is the painter's merger with the back of the cortège, suggesting that it is he who drives the line of mourners across the wide space of canvas.¹⁵³ Hence Courbet's work can be distinguished by its enactment of "protracted temporal effects".¹⁵⁴

Yet as Fried reiterates, such "gradual, almost magical unfolding" is the exact opposite of the "abruptness with which Manet's paintings announced themselves to the viewer". Indeed, the "spatial ambiguity" and placement of figures in *Le Déjeuner* actively discourages lingering meditation. For example, the crouching bather of the middle distance is the same size as the figures grouped in the foreground, even though she occupies a considerable distance from them. This perspectival distortion has the effect of pulling her towards the picture's surface. Moreover, because she occupies a central position in the composition, the bather's acceleration to the frontal picture plane gives the related impression that the background is propelled with her, thus dispelling any need for the beholder to explore the canvases depths.¹⁵⁵ Hence, as Fried concludes, the "lightening fast"

¹⁵³ Michael Fried *Courbet's Realism*, 1999, pp 136 – 141.

¹⁵⁴ Michael Fried: *Manet's Modernism*, 1996, p296.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, pp 294 – 295.

moment of contemplation needed to read such works suggests that Manet's project was not centred upon an intent to arrest moments or actions, but rather developed from an attempt to evoke what might be interpreted as the "instantaneousness" of sight or the rapidity of visual perception.¹⁵⁶

What is significant about this thesis is the fact that while Fried does not engage or explore notions of the auratic on a direct level, he nevertheless creates a framework against which Manet's work can be identified as resistant to the immersive, auratic experience enacted by Friedrich's *Large Enclosure*. The viewer would not submit to a searching interrogation of Manet's compositions precisely because all their details exist at surface level. The resulting visual assault – described by one commentator as like having a glass of iced water thrown in your face¹⁵⁷ – interrupts the meditative state through which the spectator might assimilate himself or herself into the work and engage a transcendent atmosphere or plus of appearance. Thus, to paraphrase Benjamin, the temporal immediacy of Manet's canvases would not invite the "spectator to contemplation", and would grant the observer no time to "abandon himself to his associations". As such, the viewer would not be held in the weave of space and time that characterised auratic sensation. The critics who described Manet's paintings as visual equivalents of loud, deafening bangs¹⁵⁸ confirm the threat his work posed to blissful, lingering reverie.

Importantly, the visual violence enacted by Manet's art mirrored that operational in empirical life. Indeed, writing in 'The Man in the Crowd', Poe described his protagonist's surroundings as being overrun with a chaotic mess of sights and sounds that caused his ear to ache and battered his eye.¹⁵⁹ Such descriptions suggest that the transience of modernity would similarly debase the sensations of auratic experience. In Baudelaire's vision of Paris, where ceaseless innovations flash into momentary existence and are then replaced, the rapid stream of fragmentary impressions would not permit the tranquillity of meditative contemplation. Amid this fleeting environment, the sensory

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p296.

¹⁵⁷ Alfred Sensier (writing as *Jean Ravenel*): *Salon de 1865*, quoted by Michael Fried: *Manet's Modernism*, ibid, p331.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Fried: ibid, p573.

¹⁵⁹ Edgar Allan Poe: "The Man of the Crowd", in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Complete Stories*, London, David Campbell Publishers LTD, p445.

immersion of the auratic would oppose the subject's reception of their ever-changing surroundings.

Again, a clear indication that Haussmann's engineering contributed to this phenomenon can be gleaned from the fact that the department store represented a major source of sensory disruption. As Kristin Ross reasons, Zola's *Au bonheur des dames* bears witness to the swathes of disorientated female shoppers who purchase an ever increasing number of goods in a haze of greed and bewilderment, again confirming the interplay between the urban masses and the commodity form.

Echoing Zola once more, Ross notes how the encounters staged by this climate were analogous to the act of reading a newspaper. The figure who scans a paper's fragmented layout performs a feat similar to the buyer who enters a store in which each commodity is conceived as something separate and detachable from the surrounding goods.¹⁶⁰ In both cases, the eyes and mind of the subject would not be permitted to rest on a particular item. On the contrary, they would be compelled to operate in a state of perpetual motion; constantly shifting between the enticing influx of goods on display and the "swarming anthill"¹⁶¹ that surrounds them.

The inhabitant of Paris would be thus denied the category of experience felt by Friedrich's nature artist, and for Benjamin, Baudelaire's poetry bore the sorrow of this insight. Indeed, if Mallarmé relates the magical quality that compels sensory immersion to a flower's intoxicating perfume, then lines such as "The spring, once wonderful, has lost its scent" suggest the realisation of a crisis in which the ability to encounter such contemplation has become archaic. The sense of mourning this realisation brings, the "spleen" it engenders, is the misery staged by the demise of the aura.¹⁶²

Such loss is given voice in 'The Artist's Confiteor' (1862), a prose piece that begins by extolling the lingering meditation of the auratic. In the work, Baudelaire claims that to pause and become immersed in an open sky or endless expanse of ocean is a true joy. But this harmony is soon disrupted. The poet encounters energies that create "mental malaise and positive pain" and cause his

¹⁶⁰ Kristin Ross: *The Emergence of Social Space*, 1988, p102.

¹⁶¹ Charles Baudelaire: "The Painter of Modern Life", 1964, p34.

¹⁶² Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project* [J64,5] 1999, p343.

worn out nerves to create “clamorous and painful vibrations”.¹⁶³ Such sensations might be traced to the visual noise of Haussmann’s metropolis. Amid the sensory assault of the new city, the beholder can no longer isolate and become absorbed in a single spectacle; hence the delights offered by genuine aura are lost. Yet because the text does not directly attribute this shift to the chaos of the metropolis, we might also reason that modernity has degraded the writer’s senses to such an extent that a truncated, non-auratic pattern of experience had become commonplace.

A further evocation of this situation can be found in ‘The Double Bedroom’ (1862), in which Baudelaire portrays private interiors with opposing characters. The first is akin to a “reverie”. Its atmosphere is relaxed and languid, clouds of muslin fall from the windows and even the furniture seems to slumber. It is, Baudelaire concludes, a space where “your soul can bathe in idleness”. As such, we might reason that entering this residence would yield sensations equal to the auratic. Accordingly, I interpret the experience offered by this place as a metaphor for the *flâneur*’s idealised experience of Paris, as the intoxication it invites mirrors the absorption Benjamin associated with a meander through the city. Indeed, if the metropolis encloses around the *flâneur* as a room, then we might reason that the room in question would match that of Baudelaire’s text.

However, the chamber’s idealised atmosphere is momentary. A heavy knock is heard and through the door emerge a spectre, a bailiff, a concubine, and an errand boy sent to retrieve an overdue manuscript. At once the dwelling becomes a space of “eternal boredom”; a transformation confirmed by its sudden contamination with dust and grime. Crucially, the shock of this intrusion mirrors that which the *flâneur* would face on Haussmann’s boulevards. Just as the crowd’s intervention eroded the dreamlike atmosphere of the room, so too would the masses disrupt the stroller’s harmony. In reality they would feel no intoxication, only the jostling of innumerable consumers. Consequently, their home on the boulevards would be stripped of all comforts. Instead of supporting the contemplation and lingering immersion of auratic experience, it would foster

¹⁶³ Charles Baudelaire: “The Artist’s Confiteor” in Charles Baudelaire: *The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo*, 1991, pp 32 – 33.

the lassitude expressed by ‘The Seven Old Men’ and become a space in which the subject is jaded by a climate of continually new sensations.¹⁶⁴

It is possible to discern a link between this splintered environment and the proliferation of literary works in which Paris is explored through a montage of momentary looks. Often these devices were employed to emphasise notions of the unexpected and add a frisson to the story. Writers seeking to maximise this effect thus penned characters who peered behind objects and furnishings, exploited the brief anonymity offered by the glare of a spot light or flashgun, looked over the shoulder of a passer by, or even spied through the key-holes of locked doors.¹⁶⁵ Such techniques would be central to *Detective*, a publication that invited the reader to share the sensations of the freelance investigator. As the private eye stalks the backstreets in search of clues, the audience moves with him, furtively peeping from behind his back in order to glimpse a forbidden underworld of dance halls, glamorous *femmes fatales* and all manner of villainy. But what is important in the context of the current discussion is not the journal’s faithfulness to certain forms of police work, but rather the idea that by re-staging such experiences *Detective* effectively paralleled the visual sensations of modern life. By constructing for its audience a mesh of single, isolated glances, the journal re-created the optic experience of the city street. Consequently, it suggests that sampling a state of unrelenting perceptual alertness plays a crucial role in developing the visual skills needed to endure and survive the modern world.¹⁶⁶

Support for such claims comes from Benjamin, who famously associated the *flâneur* with the detective. For example, he comments that whatever path the *flâneur* may take, each route will lead him to a crime scene.¹⁶⁷ Yet in the context of the above arguments, such ideas can be refocused. Instead of portraying the figure who prowls the city streets as someone who re-creates the law enforcer’s vocation, it can be argued that journeying through the crowd, the boulevard or the department store yields a visual sensation similar to the matrix of chance and random encounters crucial to the investigator’s craft.

¹⁶⁴ Charles Baudelaire: “The Double Bedroom”: *ibid*, pp 34 – 35.

¹⁶⁵ Adrian Rifkin: *Street Noises*, 1993, pp 92 – 93.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp 120 – 124.

¹⁶⁷ Tom McDonough: “The Crimes of the *Flâneur*” in *October* 102, Fall 2002, p101.

Manet's art can be situated against this framework. Significantly, his work echoes *Detective's* evocation of the snapshot aesthetic that dominates the exploration of urban life. *The Balcony* (1868-69) is key in this context. The scene details three figures, one man and two women, arranged on a green terrace-like structure that opens out from the interior of a dimly lit room. Like *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, the protagonists are grouped face on to the picture plane, pressed against its outermost edge. The composition is equally marked by heavy contrast; evident in juxtaposition of the white dresses worn by the two female subjects, the white shirt of their male companion, and the dark background that surrounds them. As with *Le Déjeuner*, this blackness seems to accentuate the pale skin of the figures, pushing them towards the picture's surface with great urgency. Consequently, the picture enacts an instantaneous reception.

Yet in this work, the rapidity with which the viewer reads the image corresponds to the fleeting glance cast by the *flâneur* who paces Haussmann's streets. Edmund Duranty's remarks are perceptive in this context. On viewing the canvas, he wrote that if one walked past a group of people situated on a balcony the scene would leave an impression analogous to that captured by Manet's painting, but if one stood and stared, this impression would change.¹⁶⁸ For Fried, such comments were suggestive of the methodology underpinning Manet's work. Following Duranty, he reasoned that Manet's haphazard compositions, their lack of dramatic unity and harsh, contrasting use of colour, could be understood as trademarks of a "new, artistically legitimate, rapidity of seeing" through which the painter sought to capture and relay a scene as he had glimpsed it through a passing glance, thereby relaying the sensations of that glance to the viewer.¹⁶⁹

In other words, if the early impressionists sought to explore the experience of the "urban promenade",¹⁷⁰ then the techniques Manet employed to enforce a rapidity of perception upon the viewer can be associated with an attempt to re-stage the rapid, shifting gaze with which such figures would have encountered Haussmann's cityscape. Therefore, if Manet sought to create a sense of unity between his art and the world around him,¹⁷¹ it can be argued that the speed with

¹⁶⁸ Edmund Duranty: "Salon de 1869" in *Paris-Journal*, May 12, 1869, cited by Michael Fried in *Manet's Modernism*, 1996, p299.

¹⁶⁹ Michael Fried: *ibid*, pp 299 – 300.

¹⁷⁰ T. J. Clark: *The Painting of Modern Life*, 1999, p4.

¹⁷¹ Gustave Geffroy: "Manet the Initiator", in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, 2003, p890.

which his painting reveals itself to the beholder achieves this by replicating the brief sensations that existed at the heart of nineteenth century modernity. The swift visual attack of his art is perfectly attuned to the experience of a metropolis that, as Baudelaire observed, shifts with the speed of a human heartbeat.¹⁷²

Armand Silvestre expressed comparable sentiments in his discussion of Manet's *Le Chemin de Fer* (1873). In the painting, a woman wearing a dark navy dress rests against a row of iron railings. In her hands is an open book, though her outwards gaze – which she directs roughly towards the beholder – hints at a momentary pause from her reading. To her left stands a young girl in a white dress adorned with a large purple bow. She looks away from the spectator, and peers through the railings against which her face is pressed. The cloud of steam billowing through the composition suggests that both figures are positioned on a bridge overlooking a train station or railway.

As before, the canvas is marked by the sharp contrast – the woman's dark clothes jar against the light outfit of her companion – and compositional effects – both figures are pressed close against the surface of the picture plane – that encourage an instantaneous reading. The impact of this immediacy permeated Silvestre's response, which begins by asking whether the mundane, everyday sight of a woman resting against a row of iron railings while a child stands at her side would prompt sustained visual analysis? The answer implied is no, but as Silvestre reasons, the scene might linger in your vision for a few seconds before it was lost. For Silvestre, it was that "instantaneousness impression" that Manet sought to capture, and though he attacks the painter for not seeking to convey anything greater, he concedes that the brief sensation of this chance gaze is the experience aroused in the viewer.¹⁷³

Against the background of these interpretations, we can argue that the "instantaneousness" Manet evoked to express the transient, glance-like encounters of modernity captures the fleeting climate in which the sensory immersion of auratic experience was eroded, and also re-creates the perceptual immediacy responsible for that corruption. As such, his work reflects Benjamin's claim that transformations in economic production necessitate new artistic forms

¹⁷² Charles Baudelaire: "The Swan (*for Victor Hugo*)" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, p175.

¹⁷³ Armand Silvestre: *L'Opinion nationale*, Apr. 15, 1847, quoted by Michael Fried in *Manet's Modernism*, 1996, pp 300 – 301.

to match the transformed conditions of daily life and, moreover, confirms the philosopher's assertion that if the perceptual experiences fostered by such practice could be understood as a decline of the aura then it would be possible to identify its social causes.¹⁷⁴

Courbet holds dual importance in this framework, for in addition to providing a model against which the beholder's reception of Manet could be defined, paintings like *The Burial* highlight the political unrest that inspired Haussmann to re-order the conditions of urban existence. For example, the embellishments that turned Paris into an image of capital, that gathered the proletariat in factories and compelled them to manufacture ever-evolving streams of commodities around which they subsequently flocked as consumers – creating a reality in which experience became a stream of staccato-like bursts – did not happen arbitrarily. On the contrary, such transformations originated from an infrastructure intended to allay civil insurgence with the assurance of ceaseless progress. Consequently, if Courbet reveals the political formations that underpin the debasement of auratic experience, then Manet encounters and conveys the sensations fostered by its destruction.

Indeed, if Paris was remoulded by changes in modes of labour and production, then the fleeting ocular response demanded by the new metropolis could be ascribed similar origins. As Adrian Rifkin observed, state institutions shape the visual and auditory assimilation of urban space.¹⁷⁵ That Manet's work was governed by perceptual sensations akin to the sharp turn of the head or brief scanning of everyday events that an individual might attempt inside a busy store, or outside in the street as they fought through crowds surging towards the latest spectacle, confirms the impact Haussmann's social engineering had upon his practice. Just as the city could not be experienced auratically, Manet's *tableaux parisiens* denied the beholder such encounters. Therefore, if the economic forces of the Second Empire shape the experiential crisis evoked by Baudelaire, then the mode of vision manifest in Manet's art is similarly created by the age of commerce.

¹⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p255. (See the above introduction, pages 22 – 25, for further discussion of these ideas.)

¹⁷⁵ Adrian Rifkin: *Street Noises*, 1993, p88.

However, such arguments are, as yet, incomplete. The link between the loss of auratic experience suggested by Manet's work, and a parallel decline of auratic sensation in empirical life, needs elaboration. Specifically, what needs to be addressed is the psychological nature of an artist's experience of the modern world, and the precise impact this has upon their work's creation and reception. The interplay between an artist's experience of modernity and the spectator's experience of the work needs greater consideration. This dialectic will represent a further theme of this thesis, which will focus upon a painter contemporary to both Manet and the events discussed above: the German artist Adolph Menzel. But Manet's work also points to further issues, notably the fact that it "anticipates" photography, a practice key to the study of aura. For Fried, Manet "imagined photographs", and works such as *Olympia* (1863) – with their harsh lighting and areas of strong contrasting colour – were remarkably photographic.¹⁷⁶ Crucially, such interaction with the camera has been charged with decimating the artwork's aura.¹⁷⁷ The precise nature of photography's impact upon both painting and the auratic thus needs exploration. This undertaking will structure chapter two.

¹⁷⁶ Michael Fried: *Manet's Modernism*, 1996, p372.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p583.

**“Documents for Artists: Photography, Aura and the
Avant-Garde”**

“Documents for Artists”.

I: Sun Worship.

The influence Haussmann’s Paris exerted over creative practice would be evident not only in expressions of its transformed perceptual landscape, but also in the potential such new spaces held for photographic exploration. As Linda Nochlin put it, the ephemerality of nineteenth century urban experience was particularly suited to the camera’s “random, significance destroying cut-offs, blurring of moving figures and oblique compositions”.¹

Further equivalence between photographic framing and the optical sensations of empirical life existed in the perspectives offered by the city’s architecture. The lens staged a mode of seeing analogous to that created by modern structures, with the Eiffel Tower in particular representing a viewing apparatus comparable to the camera. Viewing the French capital through this intersecting metal web would create a “montage-principle” that allowed the spectator to “crop, cut, reframe and abstract” their surroundings.² In this way, we can follow Benjamin and claim that such forms served to destroy the banality of the urban sphere and replace it with views of the “magnificent potentiality” latent within the modern landscape.³

Yet photography’s potential to capture such sights and become a vital art of the modern age was impeded by one crucial obstacle: the fact that many commentators were openly hostile to the very idea of photography gaining acceptance as a creative medium. Steve Edwards illustrates this conflict with reference to the “taxonomy” of the International Exhibitions, albeit through a focus upon English events rather than their French counterparts. Key here is the task of classification that faced the organisers of such spectacles, an activity linked to an ongoing attempt by bourgeois intellectuals to develop detailed

¹ Linda Nochlin: *Realism*, London, Penguin, 1990, pp 167 – 168.

² Detlef Mertins: “Walter Benjamin and the Tectonic Unconscious” in *Walter Benjamin and Art* edited by Andrew Benjamin, London, Continuum, 2005, pp 157 – 158.

³ *Ibid*, pp 157 – 158.

insight into the structures and relations of Capitalist society. Underpinning this project was the categorization of industrial forms created by a rapidly developing society, of which the photograph was understood to be but one example.⁴ It would be precisely this inclination to associate photography with the products of industrial labour that sparked a controversy still debated today.

Referring to the British Exhibition of 1862, Edwards notes that the showcase arranged its attractions according to four basic categories: “raw materials, machinery, manufacturers, and fine art”. Crucially, photography was associated not with the latter, but was instead assigned its own place in the subsection “machinery”. The Royal Commissioners responsible for such judgements did not see anything problematic about this decision. The promotion of photography to a class of machinery in its own right was deemed appropriate recognition for the technological developments that had gathered pace following the medium’s inclusion in the previous event of 1851. Yet such verdicts prompted mass outcry and caused an estimated two hundred articles to en-liven the photographic press with vitriolic condemnations of the Commissioners’ ruling.⁵

One such report avowed that the debasement caused by photography’s inclusion within the humble class of “mechanical contrivances” would be overcome only if photographers vindicated “the dignity of their art by deeds, not by words”. In other words, if photographers produced work that was made with a level of skill and insight that allowed it to rank alongside the greatest achievements in artistic production then there would be no possibility that any adjudicator could dismiss or de-value their practice.⁶ Daumier satirised the ensuing struggle that faced photographers who sought such recognition in his 1862 lithograph, *Nadar raising photography to the level of art*. In this work, the protagonist floats above Paris in a hot air balloon, his camera balanced precariously on the craft’s rigging as he captures a view of the spectacle below. But when read in tandem with the cartoonist’s witticism, this act becomes an attempt to scale the heights of art’s ivory tower, and earn the photographer a level of praise equal to that bestowed upon the leading painters of the time.

⁴ Steve Edwards: “Photography, Allegory and Labour” in *Art Journal*, v55, pp 38 – 44, Summer 1996, taken from wilsonweb.com, 2003 p1.

⁵ Ibid, pp 1 – 2.

⁶ “Photography and the Exhibition of 1862” in *Photographic Journal*, April, 1861, pp 147 – 149 quoted by Steve Edwards; ibid, p2.

However, the fact of photography's interrelation with mechanical and chemical processes would remain an unavoidable source of suspicion and controversy. Indeed, if Marx charged mass manufacture with a debasement of the worker's skill and dexterity, then the camera's detractors claimed the apparatus posed a similar threat to the artist. The rivalry that polarised painters and photographers was thus comparable to the resentment discernable between craftsmen and the modern machines they associated with the destruction of their working methods.⁷ Just as commodities were seen to emerge as if by magic from manufacturing processes that expunged all traces of human labour, photographs were interpreted as a conjuring trick of automated technology and received as images that bore no evidence of individual skill. That Lady Elizabeth Eastlake posed the question of photography's creative merit: "How far can the sun be considered an artist?" – a phrasing possibly addressed to Fox Talbot's claim that his early photographic experiments were conducted with a "solar microscope"⁸ – is testament to the limited focus placed upon the photographer in such debates.⁹ As Edwards reasons, photography was placed alongside "steam power, the railway and gas lighting" as part of the wide scale transformation of artisanal labour that characterised the industrial revolution.¹⁰

In late nineteenth-century France, the implications arising from such conclusions were decisive. Crucially, French law did not view the photograph as the private property of the photographer. On the contrary, it was defined as the sole possession of the person who owned the subject depicted by the image. In March 1861, the *Tribunal de Commerce* decreed that at no point in his labour does a photographer create an image that can be considered his own creation. Rather, it was argued that the photographer produces negatives, prints and images of objects in a fashion that is wholly servile and automated. The crisis facing would-be art-photographers was spelt out by a further *Tribunal* held some months later, which – following earlier judgements – concluded that mechanical

⁷ Louis Aragon: "Untitled Contribution to *The Quarrel over Realism*" in *Photography in the Modern Era*, edited by Christopher Phillips, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Aperture, 1989, pp 74 – 75.

⁸ William Henry Fox Talbot: "Photogenic Drawing" in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, edited by Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p251.

⁹ Lady Elizabeth Eastlake: "Photography", *ibid*, p656.

¹⁰ Steve Edwards: "Photography and Modernity in Nineteenth Century France" in *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, edited by Paul Wood, London, Yale University Press in association with the Open University Press, 1999, p75.

systems of image making such as photography will never yield objects that can be identified as equal to items wrought by human spirit and intelligence.¹¹ As such, the camera's artistic ambitions would be realised only when such propositions were overturned.

In *Art and Photography*, Aaron Scharf detailed a case study that attempted this exact feat. In 1862, the photographers Mayer and Pierson accused another partnership, Betbeder and Scwabbe, of producing pirate copies of their images of Lord Palmerston and Count Cavour. This act would be in breach of French copyright laws passed in 1793 and 1810 only if the images in question were considered to be works of art. Following an initial failure, Mayer and Pierson secured such status for their work on appeal. An impassioned plea from their lawyer, M. Marie, has been identified as key to this ruling.¹² Addressing the court, Marie argued that if art is synonymous with beauty, and if beauty is, in its purest form, truth in empirical reality, then a photograph that offers a truthful depiction of things – a depiction that, moreover, we find aesthetically appealing – must be considered an example of beauty. And once that classification is granted, it follows that the same photograph will be identified as art.¹³

But if such claims equate photography's creative value with its ability to faithfully depict the beauty of nature, then the rhetoric in question only anticipates a further barrier to the medium's acceptance by the canon of fine arts, an issue about which Charles Baudelaire was vociferous.

For Baudelaire, naturalism had exerted a monstrous influence over creative practice. It suppressed beauty, he reasoned, replacing feeling with judgement and analysis. Yet regardless of these concerns, naturalism had become entrenched in popular tastes, a trend which the poet viewed with open scorn. As he exclaimed, those who celebrated its eminence displayed a misguided wish to “be made to wonder by means which are alien to art”. The impact of such desires was manifest in paintings faithful to such wants, with Ernest Seigneurgens' *Amour et Gibelotte* (1859) typifying what Baudelaire decried as the “ridiculous titles and preposterous subjects which are intended to attract our eyes”. In particular, Seigneurgens' decision to name his work *Love and Rabbit Stew* was something

¹¹ Ibid, p78.

¹² Aaron Scharf: *Art and Photography*, New York, Penguin, 1983, pp150 – 151.

¹³ M. Marie quoted by Aaron Scharf: *ibid*, p151.

the poet found startling.¹⁴ His ironic response to the title expresses this distaste by comparing the animal's corpse to the figure of cupid. For Baudelaire, any attempt to compare the idea of love and the image of a rabbit carcass, skinned and ready for the stew pot, were doomed to failure. The only possible reason for bringing two such unrelated motifs together in a work of art would be if the painter had intended to construct an allegory between the rabbit and the figure of cupid. But as the poet contends, the connection would be too obscure to be attempted.¹⁵

Though Baudelaire conceded that he had not actually seen the work, he nevertheless found the sentimentality of the title to be suggestive of a generation that possessed "so little faith in painting" that it has to receive it in a disguised, sugar coated form in order to make it palatable. The poet was adamant about the origins of this crisis, exclaiming that the development of photography had fostered the abject ruination of artistic genius. For Baudelaire, the photograph polluted the "French mind", and paid out only stupidity in exchange for the blind faith it attracted.¹⁶ The camera's legacy was a manifesto that none dare challenge, and in this environment a specific credo became akin to law. Indeed, Baudelaire states that individuals were compelled to place their support in the idea that art can be nothing other than the exact, indexical replication of reality. With this misapprehension in place, a medium that allowed the beholder to make and view an image of nature that would be faithful to the details of empirical life in every possible way would be wrongly situated at the pinnacle of artistic achievement.¹⁷

Thus, in a famous declaration of contempt, Baudelaire presented photography as the offering of an angry God, an infernal tool created by Daguerre, the inventor falsely praised as a Messiah. Under his influence the acolytes would intone: because photography offers every assurance of factual exactitude the medium is synonymous with art. But for Baudelaire, lunacy and fanaticism were the forces that possessed these "sun-worshippers", instigating a confusion that cast photography as the most fearful enemy that art could ever face. The support

¹⁴ Charles Baudelaire: "The Modern Public and Photography" in Charles Baudelaire: *Art in Paris, 1845 – 1862*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1981, pp 149 - 150.

¹⁵ Ibid, p150.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp 150 – 153.

¹⁷ Ibid, p152.

it gained from the ignorance of the masses threatened to corrupt creative practice altogether. The only way to stop this devastation would be to return the camera to its true vocation and cement its position as the “clerk” of anyone who requires “absolute factual exactitude” in his or her vocation.¹⁸ As the poet concluded, if photography were used to create a lasting archive of buildings, books, pictures, or any other object that might be subject to the ravages of time and fall into a state of irreversible ruin, then the medium would be “thanked and applauded”. But if the camera attempted to enter into realms of creativity and imagination then, Baudelaire warns the reader, it would be to our detriment.¹⁹

However, it was within precisely such areas that the aspirations of many photographers remained.

II: Beauty.

To be dubbed producers of “practical” images was simply unacceptable to the ambitious pioneers of photography. They did not want to be thanked by artists, scientists, or anyone else in need of precise visual records to complete their vocation. But due to the unstable position of their medium, could the followers of Daguerre and Fox-Talbot really hope for anything beyond the pretence of gratitude a master might bestow on his servant?²⁰ The weight of the philosophical problems facing early practitioners of photography can be contextualised against ideas Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel advanced in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

Key to Hegel’s thesis was the idea that the beauty of art stood higher than that found in the natural world. Underpinning this assertion was the fact that art was born of the mind. For Hegel, any concept that developed in the human mind was greater than any product of nature. This, Hegel reasoned, was because “spirituality and freedom” are present in any form of thought. Consequently, because art was created by the mind it would be suffused with this higher beauty, and would thus exist as a category superior to the “imperfect” beauty of nature.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid, pp 152 – 154.

¹⁹ Ibid, p154.

²⁰ Molly Nesbit: *Atget’s Seven Albums*, London, Yale University Press, 1992, pp 16 – 17.

²¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume I*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp 1 - 2.

Moreover, the fact that art originated through the mind allowed it to rank alongside religion and philosophy as a discourse in which humanity could express the deepest reaches of its soul.²² But for Hegel, such notions became problematic as awareness that art did not represent the “highest and most absolute mode of bringing to our minds the true interests of spirit” developed. Such judgements were influenced by the world contemporary to the writer. Indeed, Hegel reasoned that art no longer satisfied the beholder’s spiritual needs, and attributed such failings to the “development of reflection in our life”, an impulse that sought that sought to regulate matters according to “laws, duties, rights” and “maxims”. As a creation of imagination and feeling, art would suffer in a world that defined the “universal” according to predetermined criteria. Consequently, Hegel lamented that art had become “a thing of the past”. Nevertheless, to accommodate this new intellectual climate a scientific formulation of creative practice was essential.²³ To that end Hegel postulated three definitions of how art might be understood. Firstly, he reasoned that a work of art would be a product of human activity and not a phenomenon created by the forces of nature. Secondly, he argued that an art object could be identified as an item made in order to be beheld and apprehended by the human sensory apparatus. Finally, the philosopher avowed that each work of art must have both “an end and aim in itself”.²⁴

From the perspective of such statements Hegel would advance the following ideas about art. Initially, he suggested that if art is defined as a product of human labour it is conceivable that the skills and production methods employed through the act of creative labour can be studied and learnt by anybody who wishes to craft an art object. But this would result in mechanical systems of production able to yield but a flow of objects formed by dexterity alone. Indeed, Hegel avowed that although the artwork is a product of human activity, implicit in that activity is a process of mental, rather than mechanical, production. Thereby implying that the creation of art cannot be regulated by any abstract “formulae”. Hence if the assertion that art can be produced by anyone able to replicate the techniques specific to a given mode of creative practice can be contested on the

²² Ibid, p7.

²³ Ibid, pp 9 – 11.

²⁴ Ibid, p25.

grounds of the artist's potential for individual thought, then such notions will be replaced with a description of art as a production system that depends upon creative inspiration, just as much as it requires the application of technical skill.²⁵

In this context, the image captured by photography's mechanical replication of nature would be classified as a subordinate practice from which all evidence of individual thought has been expunged. As Bernard Edelman summarised, opponents of photography would always return to the belief that machines cannot create art because they "cannot convey the thought of the artist".²⁶

It follows, therefore, that if the photographic plate was to negate its status as a cold product of industrial progress and emerge instead as an outcome of creative labour, it would have to reveal itself to be not simply a technical procedure, but a system guided by the operations of human cognition, emotion and sensitivity. As such, the camera would secure artistic validation by following practices that realised this goal, by aspiring to the example of mediums that made pictures born of inspiration rather than documents wrought by dexterity. In other words, photographers would disavow their position as mere copyists of empirical life by engaging methodologies specific to the art of painting. As Peter Henry Emerson reasoned, photography would play the student to painting's master.²⁷

Perhaps the most vocal response to this idea came from Alfred Stieglitz, who in the 1980s asserted that those who readily associated photography with the actions of automated technology were naïve to the human judgement, skill and subjectivity needed to create a photographic image. In his thesis, the camera lens became analogous to the painter's brush, and was identified as a tool through which the subtle beauty of nature might be interpreted by figures of creative genius. The level of creative control and intellectual intervention needed to form such pictures could be emphasised by the understanding of tone and composition that the photographer, like the artist, had to display. Accordingly, Stieglitz claimed that both photographer and painter alike relied upon their "observation of and feeling for nature in the production of a picture".²⁸

²⁵ Ibid, pp 25 – 32.

²⁶ Bernard Edelman: *Ownership of the Image: Elements for a Marxist Theory of Law*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, p46.

²⁷ Peter Henry Emerson: "Photography, A Pictorial Art", in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, 2003, p677.

²⁸ Alfred Stieglitz: "Pictorial Photography", *ibid*, pp 933 – 934.

Such claims possess a distinctly Hegelian tone. To be sure, if Stieglitz encouraged photographers to transcend the mechanical boundaries of their medium by exploring their innate capacity for artistic feeling and vision, then the methodology espoused becomes strikingly close to claims that the creation of art hinged upon the interaction between craft, technique and the cerebral. Arguments of this type became typical of how photographers defended their craft. Indeed, the recurrent claim that photography and painting – and hence photography and art – were not unrelated but indivisible might be summarised as follows: The photographer is always as creative as the painter. Like the easel artist he begins with an image in his mind – an image created by the operations of his imagination – then through his skill and technical mastery he ventures to realise that image in material form.²⁹

However, the manifestos Stieglitz and Emerson advanced at the turn of the century did not represent a wholly new territory. The search for a critical exchange between photographic and painterly labour had existed since the mid-1850s, finding an early prototype in the constructed or “composite photographs” made by figures such as Oscar Gustave Rejlander and his contemporary, Henry Peach Robinson. Both developed a practice based upon “combination printing”, a skill in which numerous, individual negatives were used to create a single, final image. In Rejlander’s case, the use of intricate, multi-figure compositions betrayed an obvious attempt to re-create the grandeur of history painting. The 1857 piece *The Two Ways of Life* is typical in this respect. Moralistic in tone, the work forms a narrative in which the viewer is presented with polarised ways of living: firstly, a virtuous, saintly existence grounded in religious sobriety; and secondly, a life of decadence and indulgence fated to condemn the debauched individual to damnation. Clearly concerned for the spiritual wellbeing of his public, the artist urges the beholder to follow the latter, saintly path to spiritual fulfilment.³⁰

Less pious is Peach Robinson’s *Fading Away* (1858). Simpler than Rejlander’s extravagant work, the picture can be considered an attempt to confirm the following plea, which attempts to align the photographer’s craft with the labour of painters like Ingres: If a photographer were to master the subtle effects of

²⁹ Aaron Scharf: *Art and Photography*, 1983, pp 151 - 152.

³⁰ Graham Clark: *The Photograph*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp 43 – 44.

lighting, if they used a studio equipped with all manner of blinds and reflectors, if they acquired a wide variety of backgrounds, props and costumes and worked only with professional models, would it not be possible for that individual to create images capable of rivalling the greatest paintings of art history?³¹

All the above elements are present in *Fading Away*. The composition portrays a sick child wrapped in a swathe of blankets. She sits in the company of her family as they gaze with sadness upon her frailty. A male relative, possibly the girl's father, has his back to this scene. Overcome with emotion, he appears to look out of the window at which he stands; yet closer inspection of his body language suggests that he has raised a hand to eyes, as if to dry his tears. This heavily melancholic tone imbues the image with a stiffness and formality of pose that belies the photographer's attempt to recreate an everyday incident of Victorian family life. For contemporary observers, however, the naturalism of the work was startling. In fact, a minor scandal ensued when it was first made available to the public, as people believed that Robinson had made a truthful record of an actual event. The photographic nature of the image was enough to persuade viewers that the ailing girl really was facing death. The possibility that she was simply an actor playing a part was not entertained.³²

Evident in such accounts are the problems that arose when painting was advanced as a model for photographic practice. Though both Rejlander and Robinson's work offered clear evidence that cognitive development and creative intent played a crucial role in photographic production, their work was fated to suffer when compared with the very practice to which it aspired. Rejlander's quasi-religious symbolism may have been faithful to a specific strand of Victorian moralism, but it did not win universal approval or secure his work the artistic credibility he sought. One can only speculate upon how Baudelaire might have responded to such images, but following his dismissal of Seigneurgens as a saccharine imitator of genuine painting there is little probability that Rejlander's heavy-handed ethical message would have elicited a favourable response.

Likewise, Robinson's attempt to develop a form of photographic genre painting was destined to struggle against public perceptions of photography's

³¹ Disderi: *L'Art de la photographie*, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, [Y4a,1], 1999, pp 677 – 678.

³² Graham Clark: *The Photograph*, 1997, p44.

indexical proximity to reality. The artist's adoption of the compositional techniques a painter might employ to control and construct the specific details of their canvas was not enough to silence popular opinions that the camera was but a pre-eminent recording device, and possessed little use value beyond such tasks.

Perhaps, therefore, the contention surrounding photography's integration within the canon of fine arts can be associated with the fact that such debates were posed solely from within established notions of what creative practice was and how it might be achieved. The emphasis placed upon identifying how the camera might secure a foothold in existing artistic hierarchies seemingly obscured the wider issue of photography's potential to disrupt and re-order such structures. Photography had emerged as a medium without a past, and thus offered artists an opportunity to break with tradition precisely because such constraints had not yet ensnared the practice.³³ But this was a fact with which few seemed cognisant. As Benjamin asserted, the nineteenth century saw numerous pointless arguments devoted to solving the puzzle of whether or not photography was an artistic practice, while the more vital question of whether photography's invention had served to revolutionise the very nature of art was seemingly overlooked.³⁴ Yet critical discourses begun in the early decades of the twentieth century brought such discussions to the fore.

III: Atget.

In the cultural landscape of the European avant-garde in the 1920s, the attitudes that had previously derided photography as a mere tool or device underwent a radical change. Where the expression of artistic creativity had once stood firm as an irresistible yet unachievable dream for photographers, a new intellectual climate had emerged. In this culture, the communication of emotion and feeling – factors initially perceived to be beyond the camera's reach – were replaced with a renewed interest in the speed and veracity of the lens.³⁵

³³ Albert Velatin: "Eugène Atget" in *Photography in the Modern Era*, 1989, p18.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)" in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p258.

³⁵ Tristan Tzara: "Photography Upside Down", in *Photography in the Modern Era*, 1989, p5.

For Tristan Tzara, and his contemporaries such as Man Ray and Robert Desnos, the acceleration of modern life that gathered pace with Haussmann and continued unabated across the following years was key to the erosion of earlier prejudices surrounding photography. Man Ray in particular believed the camera to be a wondrous explorer of those elements of reality that the human eye often overlooks. In his opinion it possessed the ability to capture the fleeting impressions of daily life, such as the brief, magical moment in which twilight descends into darkness. It would be this ability to record the ephemeral, evanescent details that the “slowness” of human sight could not perceive that cast photography as the medium most attuned to “the moral needs of the modern world”. Painting was therefore in danger of becoming obsolete at the hands of its former pupil, of being rendered archaic by the speed and accuracy of the Kodak.³⁶ This situation strengthened as equipment progressed, achieving its zenith in the 1920’s with the development of 35mm cameras and fast films characterised by increased sensitivity to light. The convergence of such technologies gave rise to street photography, allowing the experiences documented by Baudelaire’s *flânerie* to be fixed. Thus fulfilling the connection Victor Fournel foresaw in *Things to be Seen on the Streets of Paris*, in which the *flâneur* was called the “peripatetic daguerreotype upon whom every trace registers”.³⁷ This new willingness to re-consider the photograph’s critical potential can be traced to the influence of a specific figure, the Parisian photographer Eugène Atget.

In 1926, a year before his death, Atget had a meeting with the Surrealist group. Seeking a picture to use as cover art for their journal, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, the young collective approached the photographer with the hope of buying an image. The details of their conversation are now obscure, and the sale of *L’Eclipse – Avril 1912* remains one of the few facts about which commentators agree. But one incident, recorded by Man Ray, has left its indelible historical mark. As the two parties began to separate, Atget turned to his companion and

³⁶ Man-Ray: “Deceiving Appearances”, *ibid*, pp 11 – 12.

³⁷ Steve Edwards: “Vernacular Modernism” in *Varieties of Modernism*, edited by Paul Wood, London, Yale University Press in association with The Open University 2004, pp 260 – 261.

spoke about his print: “Don’t put my name on it...these are simply documents I make”.³⁸

This plea is initially misleading, for although Atget did not aspire to the realm of high art he was nevertheless a master of his medium. Moreover, Peter Wollen observes that while Atget did not share the drive for the “perfection of composition or print” that might be identified in the work of Edward Weston, he was nonetheless able to see “aesthetic value” in subjects considered to be beyond such classifications.³⁹ Hence we might conclude that the presence of a creative imagination was constant in Atget’s work.

A sign hung in the window of his shop on the *rue de la pitié* confirms the role he granted his craft. It read “Documents for Artists”, and attests to the market he would supply throughout his life. Yet the photographer’s legacy would exceed that of an archivist who presented salon painters with a supporting file of visual material. On the contrary, he became one of the precursors of the Parisian avant-garde. As Pierre Mac-Orlan put it, he was *Le Père Atget*, a figure who “seduced and mystified” radicals, intellectuals and poets alike.⁴⁰

These eulogies conceal the fact that Atget’s association with the Surrealists was the outcome of pure chance. He happened to live on the same street as Man Ray, the *rue Campagne première*, and was known throughout the district as an “old neighbourhood photographer” who sold work in his nearby studio. Such notoriety compelled figures such as Desnos to explore his shop, and when they entered this space they were entranced. The Parisian intelligentsia did not view his plates, prints and albums as a collection destined for the obscurity of a library shelf. Rather, they found in his work a vision that would inspire future generations,⁴¹ a “cerebral landscape” in which the boundaries separating fact from dream became indistinct.⁴²

The city frozen by Atget’s camera was the “popular Paris”, a world divested of the trappings of bourgeois culture and the “reveries of the *ancien regime*”. His documents reclaimed the character of the old city and uncovered the sights and sensations that Haussmann had hidden beneath the veil of economic revolution.

³⁸ Molly Nesbit: *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 1992, p1.

³⁹ Peter Wollen: “Photography and Aesthetics” in *Screen*, Winter 1978/79, vol. 19, no.4, p20.

⁴⁰ Molly Nesbit: *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 2002, p6.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp 4 – 5.

⁴² Albert Velatin: “Eugène Atget” in *Photography in the Modern Era*, 1989, pp 18 – 22.

As such, his pictures were both “alien” and “familiar”; they celebrated an everyday life usually absent from depictions of the capital.⁴³ In this context, a sense of parity emerges between Atget’s photography and Benjamin’s notion of “The Collector”.

For Benjamin, collecting was a “primal phenomenon of study”, a labour exemplified by the student who “collects knowledge”.⁴⁴ Atget can be considered in precisely such terms. He was literally a student of the city, a man who gathered detailed visual knowledge of the landscape around him. His diligently constructed albums – each focused upon a specific subject or theme – evoked the collector’s need to bring together “what belongs together”. Consequently, he mirrored the figure who, by “keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time”, finds he is able to “furnish information about his objects”.⁴⁵ By scouring Paris for images of shop windows, carriages and architectural embellishments, Atget followed the collector into the spaces that harboured archaic trades, detective agencies and beauty salons in which women with long hair had their flowing locks set into “permanent waves”.⁴⁶ As Benjamin put it, Atget regularly ignored the landmarks of the city, but what he did not overlook was “a long row of boot lasts; or the Paris courtyards”.⁴⁷

This visualisation of the objects that modernity had discarded was a source of joy for the Surrealists.⁴⁸ But Atget was not simply an agent of delight or humour. On the contrary, his work harmonised perfectly with the intentions of *La Révolution Surréaliste*. The journal was conceived as a parody of *La Nature*, a scientific review of long established credibility, and like that publication it had clearly defined research goals. Whereas *La Nature* debated how the sciences might be applied to industry and the arts, *La Révolution Surréaliste* aimed to collect and examine the “everyday pathological phenomena of ordinary people”.⁴⁹ Hence a photographer like Atget would be prized as figure who could

⁴³ Molly Nesbit: *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 1992, p5.

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin: “*The Arcades Project*” [H4,3], 1999, p210.

⁴⁵ Ibid: [H4a,1], p211.

⁴⁶ Ibid: [H1a,1], p204.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin: “Little History of Photography” in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927 – 1934*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p519.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p518.

⁴⁹ David Bate: *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Sexual Dissent*, London, I.B. Tauris & co. Ltd, 2004, p32.

isolate fragments of empirical life and supply a source of images to which the surrealist's could subject their analytical gaze.

However, the psychical interrogation of the everyday does not represent the sole context in which the viewer could engage Atget's work. His images also offered the onlooker the unique opportunity to project their imagination into the streets of Paris. Key to this process was the photographer's ability to encourage the beholder to adopt a specific "look" as they engaged his compositions. The album *Métiers, boutiques et étalages de Paris* (1912) achieved this effect by replicating the glance of the subject who moves through a landscape of shop fronts, flower stalls and market halls. As Molly Nesbit observes, we are encouraged to view these pictures from the particular role of the shopper. Indeed, the sequence opens with the façade of a general store, then progresses to a newspaper stand, the window of a shop selling china dolls, and onwards to a key cutting booth. By following this flow, the spectator's eye mimics the shifting gaze needed to explore the random sights offered by a walk through the city. Hence the beholder comes to imagine that they are the pedestrian Atget evokes.⁵⁰

But Atget was not content with the recreation of a general category of experience. He wanted the observer to sample the city from a particular perspective, namely that of the working class. This becomes evident as *Métiers, boutiques et étalages de Paris* develops. After the early scenes, Atget guides the viewer through spaces that are marked by an increasing lack of finery. He directs the viewer to shops selling second hand goods and focuses their attention on a modest choice of foods. The implied conclusion is that only a member of the poor would search out such things and view them with such intent. Old clothes, worn shoes, used furniture, and the produce of back-street greengrocers were the commodities of the proletariat, the goods on which they depended. Thus, when the beholder viewed these items in Atget's album – and lingered over them in the manner of one trying to decide whether or not to make a purchase – they would be doing so through the eyes of the worker. In effect, they are prompted to identify or empathise with a specific social group. Consequently, for the

⁵⁰ Molly Nesbit: *Atget's Seven Albums*, 1992, pp 160 – 161.

bourgeois observer Atget's work would initiate a reversal in economic status. To view his images would be to taste the reality of the masses.⁵¹

IV: The Ragman.

Further insight into Atget's work emerges when one considers his ability to evoke the characters and landscapes captured by *Les Fleurs du Mal*; a fact rendered deeply ironic by Baudelaire's infamous antipathy towards photography. Nevertheless, there is an affinity between the two bodies of work that transcends the notion of Atget answering the poet's plea and using photography to record the aspects of daily life that might otherwise be forgotten. For instance, Baudelaire's eerie suggestion of houses growing taller in the mist⁵² parallels the ominous presence that architecture assumes in Atget's prints. In his 1898 view of *St Etienne du Mont*, for instance, the capital's buildings flank the street like sentries and stretch to the sky with such force that they threaten to come crashing down upon the beholder.

In the case of the Rag Picker, the link between photographer and poet was stronger still. The ragman or *Chiffonier* was a figure upon which history has bestowed conflicting identities. For Marx, the man forced to eek out an existence by sifting through the scraps discarded by modernity represented the extent of the worker's debasement under capitalism.⁵³ Baudelaire, however, viewed the rag picker as maverick, a figure blessed with the freedom to philosophise, wander and drink.⁵⁴ He immortalised this figure in *Le Vin des Chiffonniers* (1857), which follows the ragman on his night time mission to scavenge the city's waste.

In the poem we encounter the ragman in a windswept street illuminated by the red glow of gaslight. He pays no credence to the presence of policemen or their informants, and instead moves through the night air crying aloud the laws and rules he has designed to govern his own life.⁵⁵ Such details confirm that, for

⁵¹ Ibid, p161

⁵² Charles Baudelaire: "The Seven old Men" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p177.

⁵³ Karl Marx: "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin in association with the New Left Review, 1981, p292.

⁵⁴ Molly Nesbit: *Atget's Seven Albums*, 1992, p169.

⁵⁵ Charles Baudelaire: "The Rag man's Wine", 1998, pp 217 – 219.

Baudelaire, the rag picker was a sublime, poetic figure. He was a romantic free spirit who lived in open defiance of the industrial capitalism that had come to dominate Parisian life. By harvesting the garbage of the city, the *chiffonnier* found an endless source of food, clothes, fuel and myriad materials from which shelters could be built. Plundering this bounty allowed freedom from the restrictions of an exchange economy and liberation from the tyranny of bosses and drudgery of factory labour. Poverty was undoubtedly the cost of this emancipation, and it was generally accepted that selling wares reclaimed from the *poubelles* or dustbins would yield no more than twenty-five francs a day, yet what cannot be ignored is the fact that the ragman's lifestyle offered clear extrication from the contingencies of class struggle. Moreover, their world granted asylum not only to the unemployed, but also to the soldier who had deserted his regiment, the businessman facing insolvency, the inventor seeking inspiration, and the scholar whose genius had been numbed by absinthe.⁵⁶ Much like the *flâneur* – whose idling was interpreted as a protest against the “division of labour”⁵⁷ – the heroism of the rag picker was thus entwined with their refusal to participate in bourgeoisie culture. Their existence was born of a conscious decision to remain on the peripheries of civilised society, and garbage was the commodity that allowed such choices to become reality.⁵⁸

Unlike Baudelaire's verse, Atget did not offer a vision of the rag pickers at work, but in scenes such as *Intérieur d'un Chiffonnier* (1912) he portrayed their homes and detailed the items gleaned from their nightly rounds. Strewn throughout their dwellings were abandoned pieces of furniture, coils of rope, scraps of paper and *hottes*, the large baskets with which such objects were gathered. Again, the sense of squalor conveyed by such landscapes is palpable. But as before, to dismiss the *chiffonniers* as mere paupers would be naïve. Rifkin confirms this in his discussion of the *Zone non aedificandi*, the forgotten spaces that stood beyond the fortifications that They designed in the 1840s, which provided the ragman with a place of shelter. While “health statistics” officially defined this region as objectionable, in Rifkin's view it was infinitely preferable to the featureless districts populated by the modern working classes: the “smoke-

⁵⁶ Molly Nesbit: *Atget's Seven Albums*, 1992, pp 171 – 172.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [M5,8], 1999, p427.

⁵⁸ Molly Nesbit: *Atget's Seven Albums*, 1992, pp 170 – 175.

filled” region stripped of all vegetation and cursed with “any and every industrial pathology”.⁵⁹

The autonomy of those who resisted such hegemony was emphasised by Atget’s pictures. When he photographed the rag pickers of *Porte d’asnières*, each figure met the camera with a steady, “knowing” gaze, a look evocative of the self-control they possessed.⁶⁰ These people were not weak but victorious. They were the figures who prowled the city’s gas lit streets, reserving only scorn for its authorities; who wrote their own laws and toasted their success. In this context, the “dregs” and “vomit” of the metropolis were not burdened by their “heaps of rubbish”. On the contrary, they were empowered. As Baudelaire put it: “Arches of triumph rise before their steps”.⁶¹ In other words, rags enabled liberty.⁶²

The intellectual framework formed by such comments reflects Benjamin’s claim that Atget’s work possessed “a hidden political significance”.⁶³ The significance in question becomes clearer when one considers Atget’s own political views, which were made public by his decision to donate over one hundred issues of the revolutionary journal *La Guerre Sociale* to the permanent collection of the *Bibliothèque Historique*.⁶⁴ It follows that a man committed to such socialistic ideology would be drawn to groups that opposed the structures of capitalism. By photographing those who snubbed the conventions of capitalist society, he indirectly contributed to the critique of capital itself. This challenge would stand even if the rag picker’s resistance of social conformism was one suffused with romantic melancholy, a quality born of the sacrifices needed to sustain a way of life that was in constant threat of decline. Notably from the city council who, in 1914, proposed legislation that would suspend their rights to salvage the rubbish on the city streets.⁶⁵ In this sense, Atget’s portraits of the *chiffonniers* refute any relation to aesthetic pleasure. They are not pastoral depictions of a simpler way of life, but pictures imbued with the potential to become active agents in wider cultural debates.

⁵⁹ Adrian Rifkin: *Street Noises*, Manchester, The Manchester University Press, 1993, p192.

⁶⁰ Molly Nesbit: *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 1992, pp 170 – 173.

⁶¹ Charles Baudelaire: *The Rag man’s Wine*, 1998, pp 217 – 219.

⁶² Molly Nesbit: *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 1992, p175.

⁶³ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p258.

⁶⁴ Molly Nesbit: *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 1992, p113.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p175.

Key to this potential would be the very fact that Atget worked with the camera, not with paint or stone. To be sure, Benjamin maintained that when the photograph engaged the beholder it would be through language altogether different than that uttered by the canvas, a language focused upon the exploration of social motifs rather than the veneration of beauty. As he put it “free-floating contemplation” was inappropriate to Atget’s indexical replication of reality. On the contrary, his prints challenged and stirred the viewer in new ways.⁶⁶ Rather than compelling the spectator to a state of passive meditation upon aesthetic forms, they allowed the “politically educated eye” to roam freely across the image.⁶⁷ It would be this discourse that confirmed both the medium’s critical potential and the transformation of creative practice it promised to enact.

V: Halo.

For Benjamin, such changes were enabled by a single factor: the photograph’s ability to *arrest* the auratic experience, the perceptual immersion in time and space, previously staged by works of art. As illustrated via Manet’s practice, the artwork’s ability to enact such a response could be influenced by the phenomenal conditions of reality.⁶⁸ However, Benjamin also argued that the auratic sensations fostered by the art object derived from its status as a unique item entwined with systems of magic, myth and religion.

The philosopher elucidates this idea in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’, noting that painting and sculpture had existed throughout history as entities able to generate feelings of awe and wonder. Underpinning this claim is the suggestion that the first works of art originated as a way of depicting gods or deities, a fact that bestowed upon them a ceremonial character. The viewer who beheld such works would be suspended in reverent meditation, a state inspired by the transcendent, spiritual qualities embodied and evoked by the object before them. The resulting encounters would be akin to the sensory captivation inspired by the beauty of nature, a spectacle equally imbued with notions of transcendent divinity. The nature artist’s attempt to interpret the

⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p258.

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin: “Little History of Photography”, 1999, p519.

⁶⁸ See above: pages 65 – 75.

enigma of *The Large Enclosure* through contemplative immersion thus emerges as a sensation analogous to the ritualistic response enacted by works of art.⁶⁹

Consequently, when Benjamin contends that the ancient Greeks would approach a statue of Venus as an object of worship, and then subsequently notes that later medieval clerics would view the same item as an “ominous idol”, his point is that the differences of their respective responses are trivial. Both parties are united by the impulse to receive the item as if it were a magical item, a predilection that subsequently shapes their cultic reception of it. Indeed, by approaching the statue in this context, the observer would be held in a spatial-temporal matrix. They would breathe the strange weave of space and time, the contemplative, perceptual immersion that constitutes the feeling of genuine aura. Moreover, this example not only illustrates how an association with the sacred enabled artworks to enact auratic experience, it also confirms a fundamental characteristic of the object that holds the viewer in the reverie of auratic sensation, namely its phenomenal distance from the spectator. Regardless of its physical proximity, the beholder would be psychologically separated from the work by the lingering acts of perceptual absorption it inspired. No matter how close it appeared to be, it would remain forever unreachable.⁷⁰

If we follow such arguments it becomes tempting to reason that the gradual secularization of society begun in the Renaissance stood poised to initiate the aura’s evanescence. But this is not the case. Writing in ‘The Artwork Essay’ Benjamin argued that as magic and myth became less dominant in empirical life, the character of “fundamental uniqueness” attached to works of art underwent a significant transformation. As the philosopher explained: in the mind of the viewer the “uniqueness of the phenomena” which dominates in the cult image is increasingly replaced by the “empirical uniqueness of the artist” or of their artistic achievements.⁷¹ Accordingly, the authenticity of the genuine work of art becomes attributed to the unique creative intellect that created it. However, such objects would retain the capacity to invoke a meditative state similar to that inspired by the sacred. The viewer would still be held in an auratic weave of time and space, and the work would remain at a distance.

⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p256.

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp 255 – 256.

⁷¹ Ibid, p272.

It is possible to expound this claim and identify a process of transference operative between the aura of the artwork and the aura conveyed by the artist. Key to this idea is Baudelaire's prose piece: 'Perte d'auréole' (1869). In English, the title of this work is "Loss of a Halo". But as a footnote to the Harvard University Press edition of *The Arcades Project* states, 'Perte d'auréole' can also be translated as "Loss of Aura".⁷² The editor's notes to the edition of 'Central Park' included in volume four of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* confirms this point, stating that 'Perte d'auréole' can mean both "loss of halo" or "loss of aura".⁷³

The connection between aura and halo, here implied, might be unremarkable were it not for a passage composed in 1930, a text where Benjamin argues that genuine aura is like an "ornamental halo" in which the item or individual is enclosed as if inside a case.⁷⁴ This suggests that notions of the auratic can be applied to people as well as things. To explore this claim demands closer study of the prose piece in question. 'Perte de Auréole' describes a chance encounter between a poet and a citizen played out in a "den of iniquity". The shocked observer is unable to contain his surprise at meeting the poet, the "eater of ambrosia", in this setting. But when asked to explain himself, the poet offers an unexpected response.

He claims that only moments earlier he was outside, amid the chaos of the boulevard, trying to cross the street whilst avoiding the dangers of passing carriages. Yet as he jumped the fifthly puddles that festooned the pavement, and evaded the galloping horses that assaulted him from all sides, his halo fell from his head and landed on the ground. He lacked the will to retrieve it, and instead chose to leave it where it lay. Then, a remarkable thought crossed his mind, a thought that transformed a potential misfortune into an enticing opportunity. Without his halo, without the symbol that marked him as a poet, he was granted anonymity. He could walk unnoticed through the city and freely indulge himself in the pleasures of the masses.⁷⁵

⁷² Translators note 323 to "Convolute J" [Baudelaire] of the *Arcades Project*, 1999, p977.

⁷³ Walter Benjamin: "Central Park" in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, 2003, p165/193.

⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin: "Hashish, Beginning of March 1930", in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927 – 1934*, 1999, p328.

⁷⁵ Charles Baudelaire: "Loss of a Halo", in Charles Baudelaire: *The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p98.

His new companion appears unconvinced by this idea, and urges the poet to report the loss of his halo – or at the very least find out if it has been retrieved – but these suggestions are met with a negative response. Far from feeling despair, the poet is happy in his new surroundings. He is bored with notions of dignity and the hallowed status he used to possess, and is excited about the possibility of standing and living alongside ordinary people.⁷⁶

What this summary illustrates is the fact that the halo represents the qualities that separate the poet from everyday life. It is only when the halo is lost that the poet is free to merge with the masses and move unnoticed through the haunts of ordinary men. Here I want to argue that such distancing can be ascribed to the poet's creative genius. The opening lines of 'Perte d'auréole', in which the poet is described as a figure who drinks quintessence, suggests this precise possibility. Today, quintessence denotes the exemplar of any given category. However, its etymology derives from the Latin *quinta essentia*, which literally means the fifth essence and describes a magical element beyond terrestrial classifications of earth, air, fire and water. This mysterious property was thought to reside in celestial bodies, and would be defined as that which gave the heavens their majesty. The man who drank of this substance – as Baudelaire imagines the poet doing – would be therefore enchanted. They would transcend the empirical world and exist on a higher spiritual plane. This would not only grant them a level of insight and sensitivity beyond that of the public, but would also cast them as living embodiments of the magical phenomena that fostered auratic experience.

In other words, if Benjamin presents the aura as an "ornamental halo" in which an item or individual is held as if in a case, then the halo worn by the poet becomes emblematic of the psychological unapproachability generated by the figure who possessed a genius of such profundity that it was thought to derive from some otherworldly source. Indeed, the individual imbued with such gifts would be revered. Therefore, all encounters with them would be marked by a sense of hushed awe akin to the auratic contemplation staged by the beauty of nature. This reaction would render the poet distant regardless of physical proximity, consequently giving them the appearance of being metaphorically encased, as if in a halo, and thus separated from the everyday world. The shock

⁷⁶ Ibid, p98.

felt by the subject who finds himself able to converse with the writer once their mythic status has been forsaken attests to the distance traditionally manifest between the parties. Furthermore, once established such perceptions would influence not only human relations, they would also govern the reception of the poet's craft.

Bernard Edelman's assessments of the legal debates surrounding the ownership of creative practice place this point in context. Because the visual components of fine art frequently evoke subjects located in empirical life, for instance a landscape, portrait or still life, the artist has to invest their work with a quality that allows it to be perceived as their property and not, as noted above, as that of the owner of the depicted subject.⁷⁷ Crucially, the quality in question is the immaterial evidence of the artist's intelligence, for as Edelman argued: the notion that an artwork is first and foremost the "production of genius" is a judgment that is likely to attract the fewest detractors in a court of law.⁷⁸

In a development of this position, Nesbit notes that laws passed in Eighteenth Century France also avowed that an artist's genius ingrained its imprint on the products of their labour. Such judgements cast the artist's work as the mirror image of their personality and hence suggested that "material and reflected personality" were not only connected but invisible from each other.⁷⁹ This logic suggests the following conclusion: if an author's genius granted them a supernatural status that influenced their interactions with others, thereby distancing them from everyday life, then such qualities would conceivably seep into the products of their craft. Once phrased in such terms, this hypothesis can be applied to the practice of all artists who were taken to be above the masses in the exercise of their creative prowess. If the artist – like Baudelaire's poet – personified the magical, transcendent qualities that inspired auratic experience, then their work would share such traits and emerge as a cultic object able to hold the viewer in an immersive web of time and space.

That Benjamin located the true resonance of this phenomenon in the work of Vincent van Gogh validates such claims. As the philosopher observed, it is within van Gogh's "late paintings" that we encounter what is arguably the

⁷⁷ Bernard Edelman: *Ownership of the Image*, 1979, pp 38 – 39.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p40.

⁷⁹ Molly Nesbit: *Atget's Seven Albums*, 1992, p92.

clearest example of the auratic, as in those images it is feasible to argue that the aura has been painted alongside various objects and motifs.⁸⁰ Such claims undoubtedly rest upon the fact that both art history and popular culture alike have fêted van Gogh as *the* embodiment of tortured, misunderstood genius. For example, an account written in 1890 argued that his art could be distinguished by an “excess of energy, of sensitivity, of expressive violence”. Such qualities were born of the painter’s ability to see the world with a supernatural intensity, a gift that allowed him to perceive imperceptible subtleties of line, shape and form and engage details of reality that remained unseen by the common eye.⁸¹ Indeed, speaking of a canvas completed in 1888 – a work finished in order to settle a debt with his landlord – van Gogh himself asserted that: “with red and green I have tried to render the terrible passions of humanity”.⁸²

Such comments grant the artist parity with the haloed, quintessence-drinking poet of ‘Perte d’aure’ole’. Like that figure, van Gogh would be able to see beyond the limits of empirical life and explore instead a higher spiritual consciousness. Baudelaire provides a further metaphor with which to explicate this claim. In ‘The Albatross’ (1861), he evokes images of a bird whose great wings allow it to soar higher than any other living thing. But in a cruel twist of fate, those same wings render it near immobile on land and provide a source of amusement for the sailors who trap this great flier in order to mock its comical gait. Crucially, the verse concludes by drawing an analogy between this creature and the figure of the poet, a comparison that rests on notions of the sublime genius associated with such characters. For Baudelaire, the poet and the albatross are kindred spirits. The poet’s intellect grants them the capacity to travel far above the chaos of empirical life and witness things that remain unseen to those below.⁸³ Without doubt, this description can be applied to van Gogh, an association that allows us to discern how his art would prompt a cultic, auratic reception. If an author venerated for their transcendent insight creates items able to evoke similar reverence, then a painting by van Gogh would likewise attain a mythic character able to lull the spectator into a ritualistic pattern of beholding

⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin: “Hashish, Beginning of March 1930”, 2005, p328.

⁸¹ G. -Albert Aurier: “The Isolated: Vincent van Gogh” in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, 2003, pp 950 – 951.

⁸² Vincent van Gogh: “Letters to his brother Theo and his sister Wilhelmina”, *ibid*, p948.

⁸³ Charles Baudelaire: “The Albatross”, in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, pp 15 – 17.

analogous to that initiated by the statue of Venus. Accordingly, when Benjamin claims that van Gogh painted “aura” alongside his subjects, we can state with conviction that it is the transferral of the auratic response generated by his status as a unique creative visionary to which the philosopher refers.

VI: Trace.

But by substituting the single for the plural, such encounters would be disrupted. Following the advent of photographic technology, artworks would be purged of their mythical character and transfigured into pictures that the spectator could integrate into their daily reality and receive on their own terms. The unique work of art would thus escape its former confines of the temple, the cathedral, or the secular space of the gallery and flow forth into empirical life. A passage from *The Arcades Project*, which considers aura against its diametrically opposed category of trace, places this relationship in context.

For Benjamin, trace is the “appearance of a nearness”, regardless of how distant the “thing that left it may be”, a definition which opposes the now familiar claim that the aura is an experience of phenomenal distance regardless of any proximity between subject and object of contemplation. But this is not the only difference between the two classifications. Crucially, Benjamin also noted that in the trace the beholder takes possession of the object, whereas in the aura it is the artefact that takes possession of the individual.⁸⁴ From the perspective of such claims we can reason that if the experience fostered by the painting can be associated with that of aura, then the sensation staged by the photograph can be likened to the trace.

As evidenced by van Gogh, the empirical uniqueness of the object and the profound genius of its creator would combine in painting to re-create the auratic immersion in time and space historically staged by sacred artefacts. It is this lingering contemplation – a sensation that could be attributed to the artwork taking possession of the observer – that enforces the beholder’s sense of distance from the work. But photography allows a replica or “trace” of the painting to be literally brought closer, both spatially and psychologically, to the spectator. In

⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [M16a,3], 1999, p447.

this context, it will be the subject who takes possession of the object, not the other way round. Therefore, regardless of any latent magical associations attributed to either artwork or artist, the item presented in photographic form would be marked not by an irreducible distance born of reverent meditation, but an indefinite nearness created by the disruption of such experiences. As Benjamin argued, technological reproducibility achieves the historic feat of liberating the artwork from its lowly obedience to ritual.⁸⁵

The use of photography as a creative medium in its own right would only accentuate this state of affairs. A medium that was popularly associated with automated production would conceal traces of the creator's hand and yield work that bore little relation to objects wrought by sensitivity, passion and emotion. As such, it would offer no grounds for auratic engagement. Moreover, the inherent capacity of photographic negatives to bear endless copies, faithful to the original print in every conceivable detail, would mean that to favour the authentic image over its copies became nonsensical. Such technology allowed countless people to possess the results of creative labour, eroding the artwork's mythic status further still.⁸⁶

Benjamin believed that this transformed mode of production would engender new relationships between beholder and object, under which "all intimacies" were "sacrificed to the illumination of detail".⁸⁷ As the philosopher elucidated: regardless of the photographer's creative intent – or the aesthetic manner in which he or she may compose their subject – the beholder is always compelled to scour the photograph for the trace of contingency, of the "here and now", with which reality will brand the image.⁸⁸ In other words, by denying factors that previously compelled the observer to venerate the artwork as if it were an icon, the photograph would permit greater focus upon the social content it was able to convey. Jürgen Habermas would later draw similar conclusions, noting that once an artwork became purged of the capacity to stage auratic reverie it would simultaneously be able to release its "historical testimony".⁸⁹ The unrivalled

⁸⁵ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p256.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p256.

⁸⁷ Walter Benjamin: "Little History of Photography", 1999, p519.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p510.

⁸⁹ Jürgen Habermas: "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism – The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin" in *New German Critique*, No 17, Spring, 1979, p34.

political potential Benjamin located in the non-auratic image⁹⁰ can be traced to this exact point. Photography is able to radicalise creative practice in a way painting cannot because by denying the ritualistic functions that had hitherto surrounded works of art it permits the viewer a previously unattainable focus upon social motifs.

This exchange represents the interplay between viewer and work manifest in Atget. Key to such claims is his embrace of photography's documentary status. By declining to embellish his practice with a signature Atget eschewed traditional notions of artistic authorship and hence refused to "inflate the value" of his images. Therefore, although history has cast him as an *auteur*, the impact of Atget's creative spirit would be reduced.⁹¹ Unlike van Gogh's oeuvre, his albums would be identified not as the sole product of mythic, creative consciousness, but would be interpreted instead as the bounty of technical progress, of the modern union between man and machine. Consequently, like the "Newhaven fishwife" captured by David Octavius Hill, Atget's prints would always resist assimilation into the category of "art".⁹² As such, his images would be divested of the authority gleaned from such status and stripped of the authenticity that inspired acts of cultic veneration.

To be sure, his practice initiated the artwork's liberation from the snare of the auratic;⁹³ it would be the revised mode of reception arising from this context that allowed the beholder to take possession of portraits such as the Rag Picker series and engage the latent political content with which they were suffused. An extract from Benjamin's 'Thirteen Theses Against Snobs', which seeks to delineate between artworks and documents, provides an apt conclusion to these ideas. The taxonomy exclaims that subject matter is ballast removed from the artwork by the act of contemplation, suggesting that the lingering immersion in time and space inspired by a work of art numbs the beholder to the social content it may contain. However, Benjamin proceeds to state that in the utilitarian document subject matter will represent the image's dominant content. Hence when the beholder views a documentary work it will be subject matter that directs their

⁹⁰ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p257.

⁹¹ Molly Nesbit: *Atget's Seven Albums*, 1992, pp 98 – 99.

⁹² Walter Benjamin: "Little History of Photography", 1999, p510.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p518.

senses.⁹⁴ Therefore, because the viewer is no longer gazing upon a unique, authentic item or an object imbued with the artist's "transcendent, spiritual insight", the spell of auratic reverie is broken and the critical potential of the work gains prominence. As a maker of documents, Atget would have enacted this effect.

The photographer thus assumes a key position in Benjamin's writing. Following Baudelaire, he emerges as the second figure around which notions of the aura's decline can be formulated, albeit through a subtlety different context. If aura names a mode of experience characterised by contemplative, perceptual immersion, and if *Les Fleurs du Mal* alluded to the debasement of such experiences following social transformations in empirical life, then Atget reveals an analogous revolution in creative labour that impacted upon the artwork's ability to enact auratic sensations.

VII: Tret'iakov.

What becomes apparent through such accounts is the fact that Benjamin not only viewed photography as a medium capable of re-ordering the conventions and traditions of artistic production, but also as an invaluable weapon for artists seeking to enact social change through their work. In effect, the photograph presented the philosopher with a solution to a longstanding problem, a dilemma that can be phrased thus: how can revolutionary art be made so that it does not become lost in "the basic conditions of artistic production"? That is, how can the artist instil critique in their work without restricting the work's public to the privileged few who might see it hanging resplendently on the wall of a gallery, or displayed proudly in the private sitting room of a collector? Such debates hinged upon issues of how the artist might reach the masses while simultaneously bypassing the art market and its exhibition culture?⁹⁵

These problems held myriad implications for the artists who came to prominence during the Second Republic, and for Gustave Courbet in particular.

⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin: "Thirteen Theses Against Snobs" in Walter Benjamin: "One Way Street". Taken from Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913 – 1926*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p459.

⁹⁵ T. J. Clark: *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848 – 1851*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1983, p178.

Indeed, while it is certainly no exaggeration to define Courbet as a political artist and to identify his politics as revolutionary, the forms he used to express his beliefs can be identified as barriers to their social integration. Such claims can be expounded by further reference to *The Burial at Ornans*.

That this painting was charged with radical intent is an observation that cannot be easily disputed. As argued above, it issued the proletariat with a symbolic call to arms, thereby generating anxiety in the Parisian bourgeoisie.⁹⁶ Consequently, the work's rhetoric would have to be suppressed. Yet such concealment would be complicated by the fact that, as a medal winner, Courbet held an incontestable right to exhibit in the salon. Therefore, the conservative members of the jury would be bound by their own rules. They would be unable to refuse his entries on the grounds of morality or ethics; on the contrary, they would be obliged to accept them.⁹⁷

But gaining acceptance to such events did not provide Courbet with a platform from which the mechanisms of cultural change could be instigated. As Clark argues, the moment political works enter into an environment associated with tradition and convention – such as the gallery – they will be paradoxically integrated into the very systems they seek to subvert. Therefore, the inflammatory content of Courbet's painting would be tempered. Rather than engaging the viewer on a political level, it would enter the trove of precious objects that the beholder looked upon with awe. Consequently, it would emerge as testament to the artist's skill and genius rather than his social commitment. The picture would thus trap the observer in the lingering temporality of auratic experience, and become imbued with a sense of phenomenal distance from the spectator. In this context, adding a radical canvas like *The Burial* to the Salon ironically becomes perhaps the best way of ensuring that it remained aloof from the public.

To avoid this regression and preserve their original intentions, the artist would have to convey their ideology in a format that could not be re-appropriated by the ruling institutions. As such, their work would not only have to become “uncompromisingly clear”, it would also need to be “uncompromisingly

⁹⁶ See chapter 1, pages 43 – 48, for a full discussion of *The Burial* as a revolutionary work.

⁹⁷ T. J. Clark: *The Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1982, p134.

experimental”. The message portrayed would have to be inseparable from the techniques employed in its expression. Revolutionary art would function only if the methods used in its creation were improvised, unexpected and alternative, if they were able to destroy a discipline or tradition from within.⁹⁸ For Benjamin, the critical practices that followed the Russian revolution of October 1917 – notably the conception of the “operative” writer, a figure “defined and embodied” by the Soviet critic Sergei Tret’iakov – would provide the model for such projects. Speaking of Tret’iakov, a constructivist theorist and key member of the radical *Lef* group (taken from *Levyi Front Iskusstv*, meaning “Left Front of the Arts”), Benjamin avowed that the labour of the operative writer represented the most vibrant example of the interdependence manifest between a “correct political tendency” and a progressive “literary technique”.⁹⁹

Operative writing was a project in which “civic” and “literary” activity become indivisible, a practice that required the writer to participate in the “life” of their subject.¹⁰⁰ To explain this process, Benjamin referred to Tret’iakov’s involvement with the 1928 collective farms or *Kolkhoz* project, an activity he pursued not only through traditional forms of reportage, but also through direct action. As Benjamin notes, during his two visits to the “Communist Lighthouse” *Kolkhoz*, Tret’iakov convened mass meetings, raised funds for equipment, encouraged private farmers to join the collective, inspected reading rooms, developed “wall-newspapers”, directed the farm newspaper, and organised radio and travelling film shows.¹⁰¹ In this context, the writer’s activities far exceeded the conventional boundaries of his medium.

For Tret’iakov this approach was essential, as the image of Russia recorded by classic works was antithetical to the rapid developments of post-revolutionary culture. Tolstoy, he reasoned, would be simply unable to comprehend the details of revolutionary life, a failing that stemmed from traditional literary structures. The attention such discourses placed on the “emotional life of the hero” would cause the writer to overlook the “social and intellectual” content of their work.

⁹⁸ T. J. Clark: *The Absolute Bourgeois*, 1973, p180.

⁹⁹ Walter Benjamin: “The Author as Producer”, in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927 – 1934*, 1999, p770.

¹⁰⁰ Sergei Tret’iakov: “The Writer and the Socialist Village” in *October 118, Fall 2006*, p69. See also Maria Gough: “Radical Tourism: Sergi Tret’iakov at the Communist Lighthouse” in *October 118, Fall 2006*, pp 159 – 178.

¹⁰¹ Walter Benjamin: “The Author as Producer”, 1999, p770.

Classical novelists would have no interest in the protagonist as a “participant in an economic process”; their only concern would be how they live, love, suffer and die.¹⁰²

Negating this “writerly arrogance” demanded active immersion in the empirical sphere. As Treti’akov reasoned, a relational approach in which the details of revolutionary life were gleaned from contact with the people was thus essential to preventing the agitational promise of facts becoming sullied by the indulgence of fiction. Furthermore, only factual portraits could educate the public and inspire them to continue “the reorganisation of reality in accordance with socialism”.¹⁰³ Therefore, because such instructive potential would be preserved only where expression and imagination were sacrificed, Tret’iakov urged his fellow writers to “create out of reality, out of concrete struggle and labour”.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, the ideals that underpinned Tret’iakov’s anti-art methodologies would also entail a conscious refusal of the transcendent genius that generated the artist’s auratic halo. Such denial would be crucial, for, if made manifest such qualities would regress the writer’s craft into the problematic sphere of creative authorship and its inherent ambivalence towards social themes. On this basis, Tret’iakov did not aspire to the cultic status bestowed upon figures venerated for their sensitivity and imagination. He refused to embrace what he called the “brand names of edification, perfection, and transcendent spiritual insight”, the fantastic qualities that cast the artist as a “prophet” whose talents were thought to derive from some divine, celestial source.¹⁰⁵ On the contrary, he derided the title of “creator” as an insult, a comment that introduces an unlikely kinship between Soviet avant-gardist and Baudelaire.

Like the poet of ‘Perte de Aureole’, Tret’iakov gloried in his ability to meet the people and become part of their community. He did not drink quintessence; he spat it out. Indeed, Tret’iakov sought to become one with “the work of construction” staged by the *Kolkhoz*, as through this role he would learn not only how to capture the everyday in his art, but also how to change the mechanisms

¹⁰² Sergei Tret’iakov: “The Biography of the Object” in *October 118, Fall 2006*, p59.

¹⁰³ Sergei Tret’iakov: “The Writer and the Socialist Village”, 2006, p68.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, pp 63 – 70.

¹⁰⁵ Sergei Tret’iakov: “Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art (Aesthetic Consumption and Production)”, *October 118, Fall 2006*, p15.

and habitual patterns of life itself.¹⁰⁶ Revolution in reality and revolution in literature would be intertwined, and for Tret'iakov photography possessed the potential to stage analogous transformations.

Crucially, the factuality of the photographic image provided the writer with a visual language capable of supplementing his literary project. As Tret'iakov reasoned, the camera offered the starting point for an “active dialectical-materialist relation to the world” in a manner that would be far superior to anything that painting could ever hope to achieve.¹⁰⁷ The ideas of Osip Brik are relevant in this context. In a statement redolent of Edelman's thesis he argued that a painter would always distort reality because the expressive interpretation of nature represented the only way that such individuals could assert that they were artists rather than mere copyists.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, if classical literature masked the details of everyday life with emotional elaboration, then painting would likewise hide the vitality of Soviet modernity beneath the veil of creativity.

Tret'iakov's account of the painter who visited the “Communist Lighthouse” in search of an “activist” who possessed an expressive appearance evokes such concerns. The artist in question chose to portray a wine maker who possessed a “beautiful beard”, a feature he subsequently rendered with heavy impasto. The finished image thus embodied the artist's personal conception of how a revolutionary should look. But shortly after the canvas was completed the farm celebrated its tenth anniversary, and the vintner honoured the occasion by shaving his face clean. He no longer wanted to look like a “hairy monster”, yet the painting relayed that precise stereotype. Hence by sacrificing veracity for emotion, it would confirm only preconceived ideas about the commune and offer no insight into its daily reality.¹⁰⁹

But a practice underpinned by the documentary realism of Atget's oeuvre would avoid this crisis and mirror the operative writer's engagement with empirical life. Again, Brik would conquer with such claims and instruct all photographers to take their pictures when they were in direct contact with the

¹⁰⁶ Sergei Tret'iakov: “The Writer and the Socialist Village”, 2006, pp 63 – 70.

¹⁰⁷ Sergei Tret'iakov: “From the Photo-Series to Extended Photo-Observation”, in *October 118, Fall*, 2006, p73.

¹⁰⁸ Osip Brik: “The Photograph Versus the Painting” in *Photography in the Modern Era*, 1989, p216.

¹⁰⁹ Sergei Tret'iakov: “The Writer and the Socialist Village”, 2006, pp 66 – 68.

everyday.¹¹⁰ Accordingly, we can argue that Tret'iakov advocated photography not only because its mechanical nature harmonised with his critique of creative genius, but also because the camera enabled him to depict Soviet modernity without romanticising it.

Furthermore, he identified the photograph as a form that possessed educational potential. As the writer observed, photography does not just record, it also explains. In his analysis it could fix for prosperity the details and mechanisms of social change and grant the viewer uninhibited access to such motifs.¹¹¹ Consequently, it is feasible to suggest that Treti'akov shared Benjamin's insight into the political value of the non-auratic image. That is, of the ability of the utilitarian, anti-art document to allow the beholder to appropriate, and thus learn from, its social content, rather than gazing spellbound at its magical, cultic character.

VIII: Heartfield.

The lure of producing works able to match the painter's verve and skill would, however, remain a constant presence in the minds of many aspiring photographers. As such, the enduring drive to unite photography with established patterns of creative labour threatened to usurp the critical potential located in the medium's indexical proximity to empirical reality. This danger could be illustrated by the rise of New Objectivity and its subsequent impact upon the photographic form. For Benjamin, the photography of figures such as Albert Renger-Patsch marked a regression into the problematic field of aesthetics that had blighted the medium's early history. Against this framework it is interesting to note that support for his work often came from quarters previously opposed to notions of a photographic art. For example, Ernő Kallai had been a staunch defender of painting's superiority, but on viewing Renger-Patsch's famous book, *The World is Beautiful*, he was moved to acknowledge the photographer's gift for "psychological and formal observation", his intelligent handling of

¹¹⁰ Osip Brik: "From the Painting to the Photograph" in *Photography in the Modern Era*, 1989, p231.

¹¹¹ Maria Gough: "Radical Tourism: Sergei Tret'iakov at the Communist Lighthouse" in *October* 118, Fall 2006, p174.

composition, lighting, and exposure, and the high quality of his aesthetic vision.¹¹²

However, Benjamin maintained that to leaf through this publication was to encounter a dubious achievement. As he reasoned, the images sacrificed politics for subtlety, and by beautifying their subject matter in this way mutated images of impoverishment into sources of aesthetic pleasure. Works of this type were able to praise only visual harmony and formalist values, and were naïve in relation to what Benjamin identified as the political function of photography, namely its ability to transform the conditions of empirical life. Renger-Patsch thus polarised Tret'iakov's project of transforming the conventions of artistic authorship. Rather than developing a practice in which critical content was underscored by the experimental use of a creative labour, he provided an infamous example of what it means to use a method of production without transforming it.¹¹³ In other words, he followed the path defined by previous generations who overlooked photography's inherent radicalism by seeking to integrate the medium into the confines of artistic tradition.

Benjamin's response was to follow arguments rehearsed in Plato's *Republic* and appeal for artists to sacrifice their autonomy for social commitment. Indeed, he believed that the "advanced" writer was compelled to place their talents in the unequivocal service of class struggle, establishing a paradigm that could spread to all forms of creative practice.¹¹⁴ Key to this manifesto would be the destruction of barriers that separated disparate forms of intellectual production, specifically the barriers between image and text. As Benjamin argued, what was required from photography was the ability to give an image a caption that could liberate the photograph from the concerns of fashion and allow it to function as a revolutionary cultural form.¹¹⁵ Therefore, John Heartfield's use of photomontage to transfigure "the book jacket into a political instrument" – a process exemplified by his design for Kurt Tucholsky's 1929 *Deutschland Deutschland über alles*, which Tret'iakov praised as a "stunning documentary indictment" of

¹¹² Ernő Kallai: "Pictorial Photography" in *Photography in the Modern Era*, 1989, p117.

¹¹³ Walter Benjamin: "The Author as Producer", 1999, p775.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p768.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p775.

the failings and mistakes of capitalism¹¹⁶ – was presented as a template for future projects.¹¹⁷

Emblematic of Heartfield's approach is the work he submitted to *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers' Illustrated Paper) a publication that, throughout the early 1930s, sustained a scathing critique of the Nazi party. Interestingly, *AIZ* was initially suspicious of montage, associating it with a whimsical project suitable only for hobbyists. However, a dearth of images addressing the journal's core themes of working class life and socialism prompted a reversal, as the techniques of combination printing allowed straight photographs to express messages the magazine sought to convey. Consequently, Heartfield's desire to "use photography as a weapon"¹¹⁸ made him an ideal contributor.

Representative of such material is *Through Light to Night* (1933), which attacks the Nazi book burnings that began in Berlin and spread to numerous German Universities throughout 1933. In the composition, a bonfire of texts by writers such as Marx, Freud and Tucholsky is juxtaposed against the figure of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda. His left arm is raised in an impassioned gesture, giving the impression that he is captured in mid rhetoric. The caption that featured in the original image, in which Goebbels demands the starting of new fires to ensure that those who have been blinded shall not regain their sight, indicates that the words are a quotation from a public address. Positioned behind Goebbels and the burning books is a view of the *Reichstag*, the seat of German government. Like the pyre of literature that smoulders before it, the parliamentary building is aflame, forming an interplay central to Heartfield's polemic.¹¹⁹

The *Reichstag* was set ablaze in February 1933, an act Hermann Göring infamously attributed to communists such as Marinus van der Lubbe and Georgi Dimitrov.¹²⁰ The conspirators were charged and a trial ensued, forming a spectacle that provided the subject of a further montage. In *Göring: The Executioner of the Third Reich* (1933), Heartfield shows the prominent Nazi

¹¹⁶ Sergei Tret'iakov: "From the Photo-Series to Extended Photo-Observation", 2006, p73.

¹¹⁷ Walter Benjamin: "The Author as Producer", 1999, pp 774 – 775.

¹¹⁸ David Evans: *John Heartfield AIZ/VI 1930 – 38*, New York, Kent Fine Art inc and Kent gallery Inc, 1992, pp 9 – 12.

¹¹⁹ Dawn Ades: *Photomontage*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1993, pp 45 – 47.

¹²⁰ See Allan Merson: *Communist Resistance in Nazi Germany*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1985.

wielding a large axe similar the type used in archaic medieval punishments. His uniform is splattered with blood, and his face is gripped by manic rage. The implied impression of a man about to administer some diabolical form of justice refers to the fact that Göring acted as chief prosecutor throughout the court proceedings. Undoubtedly, he had a vested interest in the outcome of the case. The accused maintained that he had no desire to solve the crime fairly and was manipulating events in order to justify action against the Left. Heartfield visualised such protests in his work, expounding them with the assertion that Göring himself had masterminded the fire. The caption to *The Executioner of the Third Reich* advances this point, exclaiming that in Leipzig on 21 September four innocent men will stand trial for crimes they did not commit, while Göring, the true culprit, evades prosecution. Similarly, close inspection of *Through Light to Night* reveals an oilcan bearing Göring's name – and also that of Henry Deterding, a Dutch oil millionaire and Nazi sympathiser – again suggesting that the Riech staged the whole affair in an attempt to discredit their political enemies.¹²¹

The words Goebbels speaks in the *Reichstag* image – which sound a clarion call to arsonists everywhere – reiterate this intent by requesting a burning of all non-Nazi ideology into silence. Consequently, by juxtaposing smouldering books against blazing buildings, Heartfield suggests that the Nazis sought to eradicate not only the literature that threatened their rise to power, but also the social factors that posed similar dangers. Accordingly, his work imagines a climate in which, once blinded by Goebbel's propaganda, the masses would remain inhibited because the factions and discourses that might challenge his views – be they the work of scholars or statesmen – have been eradicated by smoke and flame. In this context, fire would stand not as a harbinger of warmth or safety, but would signal an age of darkness, a reversal expressed by the title *Through Light to Night*.

Like Courbet, Heartfield thus emerges as a figure who sought to engage the political consciousness of his audience. But crucially, he also developed a practice that resisted being swallowed and neutralised by artistic convention. Indeed, Heartfield not only exploited photographic reproduction to relay his

¹²¹ David Evans: *John Heartfield AIZ/VI 1930 – 38*, 1992, pp 118 – 119/pp 154 – 155.

work throughout society, ensuring that it addressed a far wider audience than the museum would allow, he also emphasised such strategies in the exhibition process itself. When he came to show his images, Heartfield ensured that each “original” was partnered with a copy of the journal through which it had been distributed to the masses. As such, the beholder could be in no doubt that the images before them were not “private, unique, unrepeatable works of art”, but documents designed to operate beyond the gallery walls.¹²² In this context, Heartfield realises Benjamin’s project of making socially revolutionary work by employing revolutionary methods of production.

Such claims hold crucial implications for the concept of aura. Firstly, that Heartfield’s practice existed as a plethora of facsimiles divests it of the authority possessed by the unique object. Furthermore, by integrating concrete reminders of this process into the exhibition space he ensured that even when his images entered the museum they would not be transformed into mythic, precious artefacts. Therefore, regardless of how they encountered his work, the beholder would not be drawn into the sensory immersion of auratic experience. Rather, the spectator’s reception would be akin to the Benjaminian notion of “trace”. The observer would not linger before Heartfield’s compositions, but would take possession of them and hence engage their political content.

Heartfield’s divestment of the aura would be perpetuated by his use of found imagery. Indeed, although his hand is clearly evident in the painstaking construction of his compositions, the material assembled is taken from everyday sources, news photographs or press archives. Art objects rarely featured, and on the scarce occasions when Heartfield did work with original images – when he had to create or design a specific motif to complete a particular project – he did not craft the picture himself. On the contrary, he employed photographers to meet his demands. An account by one such figure, Wolf Reiss, confirms this system.

Reiss tells how the photographs he made for Heartfield had to conform to a specific set of regulations, and were often based upon a sketch that the artist had made in order to illustrate his precise needs. His exacting standards also applied to the processing, development and enlargement of the image. As Reiss explains,

¹²² Dawn Ades: *Photomontage*, 1993, p43.

Heartfield would often stand by him in the darkroom, always insisting upon subtle variations and amendments to the print in question. Once completed, Heartfield would take his photographs, dry them out, dissect and remove the sections he needed for his intended composition, and then assemble the finished piece. But this was not the end of the process. As soon as the montage was arranged in its pre-planned form, Heartfield would work tirelessly to retouch and remove any imperfections or blots on the original. Always fearful that this last act could ruin all his previous efforts.¹²³

Such descriptions present Heartfield's practice as a polarised version of Rejlander's composite technique. In other words, although Heartfield followed Rejlander's use of multiple images and negatives, he did not employ this process to assert his creative domination over a mechanical process. Although the origins of photomontage have been located within Camille Silvy's drive to bestow a "painterly character" upon his landscape images,¹²⁴ the acts of cognition and craftsmanship Heartfield brings to the photographic medium are not advanced in order to valorise his pictures as fine art, but to complete and convey an intellectual discourse. In this respect, he follows Tret'iakov and negates conceptions of expressive genius, becoming not a unique creative author but a socially motivated producer. Consequently, unlike van Gogh's painting, Heartfield's work would not possess a cultic value derived from the artist's status as a figure blessed with transcendent intellect and sensitivity. Again, it would have no aura. It would not suspend the viewer in lingering, immersive contemplation and hence would not occupy a phenomenal distance from the beholder.

Thus, whereas Courbet's use of traditional media could be interpreted as a potential obstruction to the message he hoped to convey, Heartfield's photographic practice allowed him to mobilise the social focus of his art. In this context, the dialogue between the figures in question can be located against Benjamin's claim that one of art's principle tasks has traditionally been the creation of a demand that can only be satisfied at a later point in history.¹²⁵

¹²³ Wolf Reiss (János Reismann) "Als ich mit Heartfield zusammenarbeitete", pp 188 – 191, quoted by David Evans: *John Heartfield AIZ/VI 1930 – 38*, 1992, pp 20 – 22.

¹²⁴ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [Y6a,5], 1999, p684.

¹²⁵ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p266.

Courbet raised the need for a project that would communicate radical ideology to the masses, and by embracing advancements in photographic technology Heartfield made this goal a reality.

IX: Slogans.

However, given the compelling evidence for reading Heartfield in relation to Benjaminian and Tret'iakovian theory, it is perplexing that critics contemporary to the artist sought to return his work to the canon of art history. Louis Aragon was a key voice in this context. Initially, he echoed commentators who praised Heartfield's ability to evoke the social and political realities of modernity, defining him as a figure who "knows how to create those images which are the very beauty of our age". For instance, speaking of the 1932 montage: *Adolf the Superman Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk*, he claimed that Heartfield visualised "cry" of the masses, and evoked their war against the "brown hangman" whose throat is loaded with gold.¹²⁶ Yet in subsequent discussions, Aragon avowed that photography had to be perceived as painting's auxiliary. To counter the rise of right wing politics in Western Europe, he claimed that painting had to be mediated by the eye of the camera. Only this would allow the painter to avoid the regressive implications of naturalism and initiate projects of social critique.¹²⁷ Heartfield was thus identified as an instigator of this new practice, as an artist who re-staged painting's liberation from the icon and enabled it to engage cultural rather than mythic themes.

In making such claims, Aragon was betraying the influence of an ongoing crisis in Soviet Russia. Indeed, although the revolution had raised the need for an art of the proletariat there was no unanimous agreement about how it would be achieved. As Maria Gough writes, the country required cultural forms able to express the dynamic nature of communism.¹²⁸ But as Brik's critique implies, this was a role that painting simply could not fulfil. The academic traditions of painting were perceived by the avant-garde as unnecessary remnants of the

¹²⁶ Louis Aragon: "John Heartfield and Revolutionary Beauty" in *Photography in the Modern Era*, 1989, p65.

¹²⁷ Louis Aragon: "Untitled Contribution to *The Quarrel over Realism*", *ibid*, pp 76 – 77.

¹²⁸ Maria Gough: *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, London, University of California Press, 2005, p70.

Tsarist Imperial Academy, and thus antithetical to the society formed by the October revolution. The *Lef*'s rejection of easel painting as an irredeemably bourgeois model of the "art object as a commodity" proceeded from this exact position.¹²⁹ Yet conversely, other voices would argue that historical forms should not be discarded as they represented a cultural source the working class could exploit.¹³⁰

Such ideas can be traced to Lenin. His dislike of experimental art hinged on the belief that sophisticated debates played out by the avant-garde intelligentsia would foster a practice unintelligible to the wider population.¹³¹ A resolution submitted to the Proletkult conference of October 1920 justified this distaste on theoretical grounds. Because Marxism had attained its position as the "ideology of the revolutionary proletariat" by assimilating and re-fashioning every useful thing that could be gleaned from two thousand years of human thought, Lenin claimed that creative labour had to continue this process if an art of the people was to be achieved.¹³²

Such ideals would underpin the "Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia" (AKhRR), who called for all artists to echo Courbet and become both skilled draughtsmen and passionate revolutionaries.¹³³ Many avant-gardists criticised this commitment to realist painting. Tret'iakov, for one, called the AKhRR's "Red icon painting" a redundant methodology.¹³⁴ Yet what cannot be ignored is the group's swift rise to prominence, an ascension driven by support gleaned from powerful sections of the Soviet state. The military in particular looked favourably upon their iconic depiction of the Red Army.¹³⁵ Furthermore, the "New Economic Policy" (NEP) of 1921 served to increase the audience for "Socialist Realism".

Initially, the NEP seems to contradict the communist ideals that underpinned the Bolshevik revolution. It represented a radical shift from total nationalisation

¹²⁹ Vladimir Mayakovsky: "Letter to Brik" in "Mayakovsky and the Literary Movements of 1917 – 30" in *Screen*, Autumn 1974, p70, cited by Brandon Taylor: *Art and Literature Under the Bolsheviks, Volume 1: The Crisis of Renewal, 1917 – 1924*. London, Pluto, 1991, p177.

¹³⁰ Brandon Taylor: *ibid*, p79.

¹³¹ Christina Kiaer: *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism*, London, MIT press, 2005, p23.

¹³² Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: "On Proletarian Culture", in *Art in Theory: 1900 – 2000*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p402.

¹³³ AKhRR: "The Immediate Task of AKhRR", *ibid*, p405.

¹³⁴ Sergei Tret'iakov: "We Raise The Alarm", *ibid*, p476.

¹³⁵ Brandon Taylor: *Art and Literature Under the Bolsheviks: Volume 1*, 1991, pp 165 – 166.

to a re-opening of private trade, an act prompted by the near total collapse of agricultural and industrial production in 1920. In turn, this move towards privatization created a “gold rush” environment in which entrepreneurs and manufacturers could make rapid and vast fortunes. Though disliked by the left, these “Nepmen” became a major force in Russian society. Moreover, they also offered a rich source of artistic patronage. Crucially, their tastes were conservative. The NEP bourgeoisie enjoyed figurative works completed in conventional media. Hence their emergence not only steadied the economy, it also secured the fortunes of the AKhRR by providing them with a new and authoritative clientele.¹³⁶

Finally, we must note that in the visitor’s book that accompanied the *Tenth Moscow Exhibition* (1928) Stalin himself offered a positive account of AKhRR practice and even consented to be photographed alongside Pavel Radimov, Fyodor Bogorodsky and other leading members of the group.¹³⁷ To imagine a statement of official backing greater than that suggested by this act is almost impossible.

Aragon’s attempt to re-invent Heartfield as a revolutionary painter can be thus considered an attempt to make his work palatable to the French Communist Party, of which he was a member, and by extension communist officials of the Soviet Union. But re-casting Heartfield in this role is awkward, as it denies his work the very qualities that allowed its revolutionary impulse to be preserved. In effect, such classifications regress the artist into conventional practice and risk the subsumption of his critical potential by tradition. Indeed, if the radicalism of the message and the radicalism of its execution are intertwined, then to refute the status of the former is ultimately to undermine the latter. Accordingly, if Heartfield was presented as a painter, as a figure who makes pictures rather than documents, then his craft could be re-positioned as a unique labour of transcendent genius.

As such, images like *Through Light to Night* would be marked by an internal conflict. The artist’s drive to communicate with the masses would jar against his status as an author of cultic objects imbued with a mythic authority derived from

¹³⁶ Christina Kiaer: *Imagine No Possessions*, 2005, pp 18 – 23.

¹³⁷ Brandon Taylor: *Art and Literature Under The Bolsheviks, Volume Two: Authority and Revolution, 1924 – 1932*, London, Pluto, 1992, pp 126 – 127.

their uniquely gifted creator. Hence, rather than engaging the political consciousness of the beholder, Heartfield's work would threaten to re-enact the sensory immersion of auratic reception, thereby compromising its radical content. Undoubtedly, his commitment to mass reproduction and dissemination would allay some of these fears, but reconciling Heartfield with art history – as Aragon strives to do – ultimately serves to tame his methodologies.

However, although they offered photography a methodology that could not lapse into aestheticism, a case exists for defining attempts to preserve the original focus of Heartfield's strategies as equally reductive. Adorno's voice is key in this context. Writing in *Aesthetic Theory* he sought to reaffirm the artwork as a non-objective object. As the philosopher observed, it is in the very nature of artworks to be purposeless, inasmuch as they are separated from "reality" and from thus from "useful personal strategies of survival". Such claims highlight why it is so important to speak of artworks in terms of their "meaning" rather than their function.¹³⁸ Yet such principles are, Adorno contends, usurped by montage and construction, as these disciplines actively assign art a purpose, something that is patently evident in Heartfield's work. Moreover, while Adorno reasoned that montage should not be classed as a "cheap trick" that strives to transcend photography's indexical proximity to the empirical sphere by uniting lens based media with fine art, he nevertheless avowed that even though such techniques exceeded the photographic form in an "immanent way", the revolutionary impact of such achievements had but a limited life span.¹³⁹ The conclusions arising from this realisation are unremittingly bleak; for once montage becomes shorn of its shock value the technique will be rendered obsolete. As Adorno put it, montage will no longer foster communication between art and the everyday; the process will be rendered neutral, and will thus become an historical curiosity.¹⁴⁰

Perhaps the most contentious issue to emerge through this revision is an awareness of the proximity between purpose and misinformation; an understanding of the apparent ease with which the techniques of montage could be transplanted from their origins in radical politics and re-appropriated by oppressive regimes. Historical precedent exists for such concerns. In Soviet

¹³⁸ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p219.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p222.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p223.

Russia, critical projects seeking to celebrate the ideals of revolution would be transformed into a state mandate. As Benjamin Buchloh observed, the Stalinist political system effectively subsumed avant-garde methodologies into a tightly controlled process of governmental spin. Key to such arguments would be *USSR in Construction*, a publication intended to portray a grand vision of Russia's industrial achievements.¹⁴¹

Many of the country's leading artists worked for the journal, but the legacy of their involvement has become increasingly problematic. Focusing on Aleksandr Rodchenko's contribution, Victor Margolin reasoned that the artist's multi-image compositions detailing the construction of the infamous White Sea Canal presented a positive account that contrasted sharply with suffering endured by those assigned to the project. The most problematic aspect of Rodchenko's work is revealed when one considers the text that partnered his photographs. To accommodate its limited budget, the White Sea Canal was built using labour harvested from prisons run by the secret police. Accordingly, the documentation that accompanied the project was keen to present work on the scheme as a form of self-redemption. Slogans preaching atonement for sins committed against the state thus became the context within which Rodchenko's pictures were placed. Hence the masses received a heroic, valiant vision from which all evidence of the thousands who perished while toiling to advance the Soviet cause was purged.¹⁴²

Consequently, at the very moment in which "modernist montage aesthetics" stood poised to become a vehicle for the education and enlightenment of the masses they were recast as a conduit for nationalist Stalinist ideology.¹⁴³ Indeed, from the mid 1930's onwards, creative practice was assigned a project of "myth making" that would hide Stalin's "perpetration of cruel and shameful deeds" beneath a celebratory veneer.¹⁴⁴

The use of technology to saturate the country with works of this type thus suggests that photography and photomontage had replaced Socialist Realist painting as the practice most able to hide the realities of communist life behind a

¹⁴¹ Benjamin Buchloh: "From Factura to Factography", in *The Contest of Meaning* edited by Richard Bolton, London, MIT Press, 1996, p71.

¹⁴² Victor Margolin: *The Struggle for Utopia*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp186 – 187.

¹⁴³ Benjamin Buchloh: "From Factura to Factography", 1996, p76.

¹⁴⁴ Victor Margolin: *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy 1917 – 1946*, London, 1997, pp 211 – 213.

false vision of a wondrous Socialist heaven.¹⁴⁵ Benjamin himself spoke of this situation, remarking with forlorn acceptance that, the “constructivists, suprematists and abstractivists” who previously made work designed to serve the October Revolution have all been discharged from their occupations. The radical interplay between critical content, experimental production and political change had been replaced by projects seeking only to announce the glory of Stalin’s rule with “banal clarity”.¹⁴⁶

Therefore, if employing traditional media to convey revolutionary ideology raises the possibility that such works might be swallowed by tradition and re-cast as precious, sacred objects, then using radical techniques to express radical content highlights the analogous threat that such practices may be adopted by institutions seeking not to liberate but control. Although photography enabled methodologies focused upon the exploration and mass dissemination of social-political motifs, there is a parallel danger that such techniques might be used not to awaken and engage the beholder’s consciousness, but to suppress and restrain.

Against this framework, we might consider whether a practice dependant upon factors key to the artwork’s aura – notably the autonomy of the creator, the influence of creative genius and the generation of authentic, unrepeatable objects – could offer a methodology able to preserve the artist’s critical stance by establishing a discourse that could not be so easily circulated throughout society and hence become appropriated by dominant social forces. Adorno raised this exact debate in his response to Benjamin, claiming that art will survive only if it continues to resist society.¹⁴⁷ Crucially, the aura was presented as key to such resistance. For the philosopher, the distance between aesthetics and the practical world was reflected in the distance between aesthetic object and viewer. As Adorno reasoned, if the lingering suspension of auratic contemplation distances subject from artwork – thereby preventing them from intervening with it – then the art object can be accordingly identified as a form that does not intervene in empirical life.¹⁴⁸ This separation would engender an inbuilt eschewal of ‘social

¹⁴⁵ Margarita Tupitsyn: “From the Politics of Montage to the Montage of Politics: Soviet Practice 1919 Through 1937” in *Montage and Modern Life*, edited by Matthew Teitelbaum, London, MIT Press, 1992 p125.

¹⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin: “Moscow” in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1924 – 1934*, 1999, p39.

¹⁴⁷ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p322.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p429.

norms". Artworks would thus possess no need to prove themselves "socially useful", as they would oppose society by virtue of their very existence.¹⁴⁹ It therefore follows that attempts to eliminate phenomenal distance, politicize creative practice and achieve its "total integration" into the everyday may effectively negate the radicalism inherent to art.¹⁵⁰

Such propositions place the camera in a delicate position. They imply that photography's critical potential would not lie in the re-ordering of creative authorship and production that initiated the destruction of the artwork's aura. On the contrary, if we follow Adorno's thesis then the problem of how photography might negate its mechanical status and be accepted as a process of intellectual intent becomes prudent once more. In other words, the issue facing photographers would be how to realise a practice in which the influence of individual creative insight allowed the photographic print to escape its utilitarian classifications, and inbuilt potential for mass replication, and emerge instead as a unique, auratic artefact irreducibly distanced from empirical society. The quandary of how this might be achieved suggests that the dialectical exchange between the lens, the artwork and the auratic remains open. Yet before considering how this dialogue might be resolved, it is necessary to follow a path outlined in the closing paragraphs of chapter one and focus upon the art of Adolph Menzel. Undertaking this project will introduce an intellectual framework against which further dimensions of the European avant-garde can be explored, thereby raising the suggestion that such work contributed to the aura debate in ways that exceeded the motifs discussed above.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p321.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p429.

**“Memory Traces: Empathy and Experience in Walter
Benjamin and Adolph Menzel”**

“Memory Traces”.

I: Freud.

For Sigmund Freud, the development of “mental events” was governed by the “Pleasure Principle”, a “metapsychological” concept that defines “an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure” as the impulse that shapes psychical activity. In both instances, the subject’s response to levels of excitation is crucial, for “unpleasure” is the state that corresponds to an increase in levels of excitation, and pleasure to a reduction in the intensity of stimuli. However, in posing this thesis Freud’s intent was not to explore the simple interplay “between the strength of the feelings of pleasure and unpleasure and the corresponding modifications in the quantity of excitation”. On the contrary, he claimed that the “pleasure principle” presented opportunities for critical psychoanalytic study, most notably in areas anticipated by the work of Gustave Fencher.¹

As Freud recounts, Fencher argued that if “conscious impulses” are open to the influence of pleasure and unpleasure, then these same impulses could be located within a “psycho-physical” relationship to the states of stability and instability. Such ideas proved central to Freud’s thesis, as they suggested the possibility of a process designed to preserve mental stability by regulating the level of excitation.² The success of the proposed system would thus hinge upon its ability to neutralize “perceptions of excitations” cast by the outer world. Key to this argument would be the notion of a psychical shield defending the organism against the excitatory effects triggered by such energies. To illustrate how this mechanism might be formed, Freud asked the reader to imagine a simple living organism, one sensitive to stimulation from the outside world. The creature’s external surface would receive these energies; an idea informed by the science of embryology, which asserts that the central nervous system and sense organs develop out of the ectoderm, the outer most section of the three cell layers of the embryo. As Freud reasoned, because the “grey matter” of the cortex derives from

¹ Sigmund Freud: “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in Sigmund Freud: *On Metapsychology*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991, pp 275 – 276.

² Ibid, pp 276 – 277.

the primitive surface layer of the organism it may inherit some of its characteristics.³

Noting this creature's biological traits prompted Freud to suggest that continual exposure to stimulation might permanently modify its surface, a proposition that can be elucidated through Henri Bergson. Crucially, Bergson claimed that if we study the development of the perceptual apparatus in any living thing we will find that all living matter – even a simple “mass of protoplasm” – is “irritable and contractile”. As such, it will be subject to the influence of simulation from the outer world, and will respond to it through “mechanical and chemical reactions”.⁴

In Freud's hypothesis, the fact that the creature's outer shell retained a cellular similarity to the “grey matter” of its nerve tissue rendered it vulnerable to precisely such reactions. Moreover, if left unchecked this vulnerability threatened to transform its external layer into a hardened skin that would be able to resist and deflect stimuli. Yet this mutation would not be considered detrimental. On the contrary, it represented a change key to the organism's survival.⁵ As Freud argued, the tiny creature occupies a world charged with powerful energies and would be killed by the simulations such forces emit if it did not possess a method of protecting itself from them.⁶

Following this assertion, Freud concluded that defence against stimuli was more important to living organisms than *reception* of stimuli. As such, he formulated an intellectual framework against which it is feasible to argue that a system of defence analogous to that found in the creature described above might exist in all living things.⁷ In this chapter, I aim to engage such ideas and apply them to the philosophical study of the aura. Accordingly, we must return to the work of Walter Benjamin, who used Freud's thesis to advance his critical reading of Baudelaire.

³ Ibid, p297.

⁴ Henri Bergson: *Matter and Memory*, New York, Zone Books, 1988, p28.

⁵ Sigmund Freud: “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, 1991, pp 297 – 298.

⁶ Ibid, p298.

⁷ Ibid, pp 298 – 299.

II: Proust.

As illustrated in chapter one, Benjamin believed that Baudelaire's verse gave poetical expression to a fundamental shift in the nature of experience. Yet in later discussions, Benjamin reasoned that locating an exact explanation of this change demanded further research. Consequently, Freud's ideas were employed by the philosopher to clarify and expand the methodology of his work, albeit in situations somewhat different to those that Freud had anticipated.⁸ Interestingly, this project began not with a direct return to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, but with a reading of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Underpinning the philosopher's interest in this work were the twin notions of *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire* presented therein. As Benjamin elucidates, Proust named voluntary memory a servant of the intellect, defining it as a recollection that gives information about the past but "retains no trace of that past". Involuntary memory, however, represented an accidental restoration of past impressions, an instant recall achieved without conscious intention.⁹ An example taken from the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past* illustrates the phenomenon.

In *Swann's Way*, Proust describes his inability to remember his childhood home of Combray. This lapse endured until one cold winter's day, when his mother greeted his return home with some tea. Alongside the warming drink was served a Petites Madeleine, a pastry that looked as though it had "been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell". A mechanical reaction to the bitter climate compelled Proust to take a morsel of this cake and dowse it with tea. Yet when he raised this mixture to his lips he was struck by an unexpected sensation.¹⁰ As the writer recounts, an "exquisite pleasure" overcame his senses as he ate and drank, but this sensation offered no clue as to its origins.¹¹

From where, Proust asks, did this joyous emotion originate? His only guide was that its providence was in some way connected with the taste of a pastry

⁸ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, pp 316 – 317.

⁹ Ibid, p315.

¹⁰ Marcel Proust: *Swann's Way*, London, Penguin, 2000, pp 55 – 56.

¹¹ Ibid, p56.

saturated with tea, but as it “infinitely transcended those savours” he reasoned that it must derive from some other source. Presently, Proust reasoned that the answer lay not in the cup but in him. In other words, the taste of tea and cake had awoken in the writer some force or agent from which happiness flowed forth. Keen to identify this sensation’s origin, Proust concentrated on the flavour of the pastry, and in so doing noted that he could feel something that had remained dormant within his psyche, like an anchor buried into the sea bed, suddenly break free from its hiding place and take shape in his mind.¹² Following further reflection, the source of this feeling was revealed. It stemmed from a memory formed when Proust was a young boy. As the writer elucidates, the taste he had just experienced was the equal of one he regularly encountered as a child. In Combray he used to visit his aunt Léonie every Sunday morning before going out to church. And when he arrived his aunt would always offer him a piece of Madeleine cake, which she would first dip in her own cup of standard or lime flower tea. The tea and cake Proust received at his mother’s house thus evoked a flavour he had enjoyed long ago.¹³

With this connection made, Proust’s memory immediately conjured a vibrant image of his former home, replenishing the details he had struggled to re-capture. He described his astonishment at the sharp relief with which his mind rendered first his Aunt’s home and then the surrounding landscape. Her “old grey house” suddenly sprang into view, Proust tells us, like the background scenery used in a theatre production. And in its wake followed the small pavilion and attached garden which had been constructed behind the house for the author’s parents. This restoration continued at pace, until the writer finds that he is able to see the town square where he used to go before luncheon, the streets along which he used to run when completing errands, and the country roads along which he used to walk when the weather was fine.¹⁴ Therefore, a simple sensation of taste was responsible for reclaiming impressions that were previously beyond reach.

Through this account, we encounter Proust’s conviction that the past exists somewhere beyond the grasp of human intelligence, hidden in some material form. As Proust explained, this idea stemmed from a belief rooted in Celtic

¹² Ibid, p57.

¹³ Ibid, p58.

¹⁴ Ibid, p59.

mythology, which avows that souls of the departed often become trapped in animals, plants, or objects and remain lost until the day one happens across the item in question and frees the soul from its prison. For Proust, recollections of personal history followed this exact pattern. It would, he reasoned, be a matter of pure chance whether or not the individual discovered the item that triggers the release of their forgotten memories.¹⁵

However, this proposition illuminates only the process and not the cause; the factors that might explain the transfer of mental impressions to material objects still need clarification. To that end, Benjamin postulated that social forces could impede the formation of memory traces by subverting the subject's ability to gain possession of their experiences. Journalism and newspapers were presented as contributors to such restrictions, as both were charged with numbing the readers ability to "assimilate the data" of empirical life. To be sure, Benjamin argued that the press sought to insulate the reader from the information they receive, rather than display it in a digestible form. This estrangement would be compounded by the constant newness of the news itself. If information were frequently updated, then communication would no longer depend upon systems of narration. Therefore, whereas storytelling fostered a system in which tales bore the trace of the narrator in the same way as piece of ceramics would bear the evidence of its maker's hands, journalism instigated a process in which events did not need to become entrenched in "the life" of the narrator before they could be relayed.¹⁶

Proust's wish to reclaim his childhood memories, the events and impressions entwined with his own existence, can be thus read an attempt to reverse this trend and restore the storyteller to prominence. But like efforts at willed recollection, the successful completion of this task would rest upon matters of chance. In this context *mémoire involontaire* becomes both the solution to, and dilemma of, the writer's project. It was the preserve of the individual who had become estranged and isolated from their experiences. Yet it also offered an unplanned route to the past through which "pure memory" – the faculty Bergson described as that which captures and orders the range of impressions that an individual may acquire and

¹⁵ Ibid, p55.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, pp 315 – 316.

accumulate over the course of their lifetime¹⁷ – could be recovered. Therefore, we are left with the paradoxical conclusion that the continuation of storytelling would hinge upon the intervention of involuntary memory. Yet Benjamin also avowed that such systems would develop only where memory had first become separated from consciousness. Crucially, it would be Freud who provided the framework against which this idea could be subjected to critical exploration.¹⁸

Key to Benjamin's position was the idea that the central purpose of memory was the preservation of our impressions, whereas "reminiscence" was focused upon their destruction. As such, he followed Theodore Reik's assertion that "*memory is conservative, reminiscence, destructive*".¹⁹ Freud's suggestion that consciousness "takes the place of a memory trace" was presented as a development of this claim. An exchange fulfilled by his ensuing argument that it is impossible for an event or occurrence to both form an impression in the subject's consciousness and leave behind a lasting memory trace.²⁰

For Freud, consciousness does not receive memory traces. He exclaimed that fragments of experiences often expire in the process of "becoming conscious". Accordingly, memory traces would often leave their most indelible and enduring imprint when the event that created an impression was one that had not entered into the subject's consciousness. Under this system, "permanent" memories would be formed only when impressions were processed and stored in systems that are detached or separate from consciousness. As Freud notes: the after-image of the event does not enter into consciousness but is transmitted to the systems lying in close proximity, and it is in such locations that memory traces will be retained.²¹ The significant and elusive position taste occupied in Proust's childhood memory of Combray confirms this hypothesis. The writer's past resisted all attempts at conscious recollection because it had been absorbed into a sensory matrix other than consciousness, and only when that system was triggered – as it was by the Madeleine pastry – could it be released and reclaimed.

¹⁷ Henri Bergson: *Matter and Memory*, 1988, p150.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, p316.

¹⁹ Theodore Reik: *Der überraschte Psychologe*, Leiden, 1935, pp 130 – 132, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, London, The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, [K8,1], 1999, p402.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, p317.

²¹ Sigmund Freud: "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", 1991, p296.

Yet accepting this proposition leaves a key question unanswered: why should consciousness act in a manner so destructive? Responding to this debate, Freud referred to the human being as an organism receptive to stimuli, but in order to survive as an organism, needing to protect itself against excessive stimulation. In Benjamin's analysis, the need for such protection in the human subject could be attributed to the sensory landscapes of modernity and automated industry, which conveyed a barrage of optic sensations to the viewer.²² As before, the outer layer of the being was offered as that most able to nullify this rush. But this time it would be consciousness, rather than an external membrane or skin, which emerged as the shield. Baudelaire's declaration that the figure who paces the metropolis is plugged into a sea of electrical energy, a force that transforms him into a "*kaleidoscope* equipped with a consciousness",²³ illustrates the rationale behind this idea. For Freud, that same consciousness represented the part of the cortex so hardened by exposure that, as Benjamin observed, it offered the optimum location for the "reception of stimuli".²⁴ Indeed, although Freud's notion of consciousness acting as a buffer against psychical trauma was formulated in response to the experience of war, Benjamin avowed that the neurological sensations of modernity were analogous to that of "shell-shock", thus making a defence originally ascribed to the soldier applicable to the civilian.²⁵

Against this framework, we can identify precisely why consciousness had to be purged of memory traces. If stimuli were allowed to form lasting imprints within consciousness – if the images derived from them remained "constantly conscious" – then the protection it offered would expire, as the effects of accumulation would restrict the system's capacity to absorb further excitations.²⁶ Baudelaire's description of the "sullen skull" burdened with more memories than could be gathered over a thousand lifetimes is redolent of the misery born of just such a failure.²⁷ Therefore, the details of everyday experience had to be diverted

²² Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, p314.

²³ Ibid, p328. (Here Benjamin refers to the description of Constantin Guys Baudelaire gives in *The Painter of Modern Life*. For further reference to this work see above, pages 59 – 62.)

²⁴ Ibid, p318.

²⁵ Susan Buck-Morss: "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered", in *October: The Second Decade*, London, MIT Press, 1997, pp 388 – 389.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud: "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", 1991, p296.

²⁷ Charles Baudelaire: "Spleen (II)" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, Oxford, Oxford University press, 1998, p147.

to areas such as taste, smell or touch – or to external objects like the Madeline – because once the “synesthetic system” is given the task of discharging stimuli, its role is effectively reversed. Rather than preserving information, it will strive to numb the senses and stifle the memory, effectively becoming anaesthetic in nature.²⁸ Approached through a Benjaminian context, such claims illustrate the crisis that blocks assimilation of the outside world, and highlight the significance of *la mémoire involontaire* as the sole refuge of impressions lost amid the ocular battering of the modern.

III: Storytelling.

The conditions that engendered Freud’s “shock defence” were key to Baudelaire’s work. Indeed, the poet’s drive to parry traumas with “his spiritual and psychical self”²⁹ was evident in his erratic movements, which drew comparison to the startled scurrying of a spider.³⁰ In Benjamin’s analysis, the “fantastic combat” implied by such evasive acts could be understood as a war waged between the opposing categories of “*Erfahrung*” and “*Erlebnis*”.³¹ Crucially, both terms denote forms of experience, but there is no English equivalent beyond this simplistic definition. Therefore, although a workable classification exists in Benjamin’s distinction between “long” and “immediate” experience – likewise in his assertion that what separates the categories is the fact that the former cannot be separated from the representation of a “continuity or sequence”³² – I will use the German of his original text.

Erlebnis means a fragmented or restricted pattern of experience, in which the reception of events is limited to the moment of their occurrence. As such, an incident experienced as *Erlebnis* will not leave a lasting trace in the subject’s memory. In contrast, *Erfahrung* denotes a more substantial conception of experience, a process of accumulation whereby the details of everyday life are retained and amassed, forming the bank of impressions needed to create a

²⁸ Susan Buck-Morss: “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics” 1997, p390.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin: “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, 2003, p319.

³⁰ Eugène Marsan: *Les Canes de M. Paul Bourget et le bon choix de Philinte*, Paris, 1923, pp 236 – 237, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, [J11a,3] 1999, p248.

³¹ Walter Benjamin: “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, 2003, p319.

³² Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [m2a,4], 1999, p802.

personal history.³³ Consequently, we can reason that *Erlebnis* describes an experience that has not become “the object of conscious recognition”, allowing *Erfahrung* to be thought of as its conscious other.³⁴

Such interpretations are indebted to the Freudian “shock defence”. Indeed, Benjamin argued that by defending against trauma, consciousness restricts our memory of incidents to the second in which they transpire. As he put it, whenever consciousness is required to screen against onrushing stimuli – and is compelled to accomplish this task with high levels of efficiency – impressions will not enter into “long experience” (*Erfahrung*) and will thus be reduced to the lesser category of “isolated experience” (*Erlebnis*).³⁵

The sense in which *Erlebnis* describes an “immediate” experience shorn of continuity is made clear in this context. However, the notion of such sensations exceeding *Erfahrung* as the dominant mode of experience in empirical life cannot be thought of as harmless. On the contrary, Costello notes that the transformation yields a detrimental legacy, the impact of which is twofold. Firstly, the present will be separated from the past because it will no longer be absorbed into an individual’s memory of their previous experiences. Secondly, because impressions are no longer retained both the “collective store of experience” and a subject’s memory of present encounters will not be relayed to future generations.³⁶

The impact of this dilemma is immediately relevant to the art of storytelling. The idea that the practice formed a “collective store” of experience was central to Benjamin’s study of Nikolai Leskov, a figure presented as the exemplar of the craft. In the text, the Storyteller is described as a figure who can “exchange experiences” with a group by introducing the details of his or her past into their memory. That same audience is then able to absorb and retell the tale, establishing an interplay central to its existence. But this does not engender a simple duplication of narrative content. Rather, it forms a “repetition” of “narrative form”. Each time the tale is retold the act becomes a unique event within a wider process of replication, allowing the story to be perpetuated

³³ Diarmud Costello: “Aura, Face, Photography: Re-reading Benjamin Today”, in: *Walter Benjamin and Art*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, 2005, pp178 - 179.

³⁴ Andrew Benjamin: “Tradition and Experience: Walter Benjamin’s *Some Motifs in Baudelaire*”, in: *The Problems of Modernity*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, London, Routledge, 1989, p132.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin: “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 2003, p319.

³⁶ Diarmud Costello: “Aura, Face, Photography”, 2005, p179.

through systems of retention and dissemination. Therefore, a temporally determined form of tradition – where motifs are bequeathed and renewed through a process of collective experience and memory – is created.³⁷

Yet because storytelling hinges upon the accumulation of encounters that have become embedded in the “life” of the narrator, once the ability to experience as *Erfahrung* fails, so too will the interplay between listener and collective break down. That Proust’s inability to reclaim his memories disrupted his attempt to revivify the art confirms such claims. Moreover, once the teller becomes estranged from their own experiences, the spoken link that binds past, present and future will be undone, thereby shattering the collective store of impressions such dialogues nurture and support.

Examined in a purely literary context, this loss can be attributed to modern modes of printing and production, a claim indebted to Benjamin’s assertion that journalism attacks the reader’s ability to preserve their impressions. Because it is encountered instantaneously then succeeded by the next headline, the constantly updated stream of information offered by the press seals the reader in a space where experience of the outside world is limited to a brief recognition of passing events. The newspaper thus renders the subject unable to retain information beyond the instance in which it has been imparted. As such, it mirrors the operations of *Erlebnis*.

Equally detrimental to the craft of storytelling is the fact that printed narration exists as a “self-enclosing” form, a conception that can be explained in relation to the novel. For example, whereas the story depends upon a “community of listeners”, the novel does not need to be re-created through public speech and hence requires no shared relay for its existence. In this context, the repetition once instrumental to the continuity of tradition is rendered obsolete, a process that yields the threat of fragmentation. By denying the need for human interaction, the novel replaces the listening community with isolation, effectively undoing the need for collective exchange.³⁸

Similar concerns emerge when contrasting the “oral” traditions of the folktale, the saga, the proverb and the comic tale – all examples of the epic form at its purest – against the novel. The epic, Benjamin argued, found its equivalent in the

³⁷ Andrew Benjamin: “Tradition and Experience”, 1989, p122 – 125.

³⁸ Ibid, p126 – 128.

ocean. Initially, this analogy may be viewed against ideas of scale, for the vastness of the ocean is the very essence of the epic. Yet what truly links the categories is a notion of interaction. For Benjamin, the coast offers a range of pastimes: you can relax on the sand, listen to the sound of breaking waves, and collect the shells that the surf discards on the beach. Such comments conjure images of a figure who actively engages their environment, a context that is instantly applicable to the epic writer, as through his practice he connects with the lives of the people and throws his work open to the experiential memory of the collective. But the ocean also offers the possibility of journeys. Its vast surface allows you to chase the horizon until you see “nothing but sea and sky”.³⁹ This voyage represents the labour of the novelist, which is “solitary and silent”. As Benjamin concludes, the individual who lives in isolation creates the novel. It is the product of the figure who has no opportunity to share their thoughts and concerns, who receives no counsel and can impart no guidance to others.⁴⁰

However, there is more at stake in these distinctions than explorations of paradigm shifts in literary practice. The disruption of the collective exchange that underpins both story and epic can also be ascribed an economic base. Key to such claims is the notion of an interplay between the debasement of collective memory and the divisions of labour that characterised the industrial manufacture of the nineteenth-century, a phenomenon Benjamin charged with sealing the worker “off from experience”.⁴¹

As Marx observed, de-skilled labour alienates the worker by reducing human expertise to a process of rhythmic motions. He famously avowed that it “exhausts the nervous system” and choreographed human reflexes until they become a perfect performance of repetition.⁴² Following this critique, Benjamin commented that such relentless, faultless execution should allow the experience of labour to form definite traces within consciousness, and hence foster a collective store of impressions propagated by acts of narrative exchange. But in reality, he contends that this absorption was rarely achieved. Specifically, he identified it as antithetical to the processes of mass manufacture that emerged in

³⁹ Walter Benjamin: “The Crisis of the Novel”, in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927 – 1934*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p299.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p299.

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin: “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, 2003, p329.

⁴² Karl Marx: *Capital*, 1990, p548.

the nineteenth-century, processes that disbanded practices derived from skill and handicrafts and replaced them with automated systems to which the worker had to subject their will.⁴³

This transformation implies that, unlike the artisan, the figure employed in such spaces would not learn through traditions that have been formed and disseminated by past generations. Neither would they have the opportunity to stage their own interaction with that ongoing dialectic. As Andrew Benjamin argued, where the “rhythm of work” becomes drill rather than practice, the ensuing climate will destruct the continuity through which the labourer might experience their actions as *Erfahrung*.⁴⁴

Applying such notions to Marx’s critique of mass manufacture implies that the debasement of experience Benjamin associated with the emergence of automated production can be attributed to the Pleasure Principle’s intervention in a climate of intense visual and auditory stimulation. In order to negate the threat of shock posed by the cacophonous landscape of heavy industry, impressions would have to be deflected and limited to a single point in time, thus restricting the individual’s capacity to take hold of their experiences and relay them to others. Such claims might be elucidated through Bergson’s notion of impressions that remain “fixed” within the subject. Because the machine uses the individual, because it no longer submits to the dexterity and commands of human skill, the machinist will follow Bergson’s conception and develop a set of “intelligently constructed memories” that guarantee the necessary response to particular events. The operations of this memory will allow individuals to adapt themselves to given situations as through it the “actions” which they encounter will trigger a series of “reactions” that are sometimes “accomplished”, sometimes “nascent”, but always of a general appropriateness to the task or conditions at hand. In other words, it is not memory but a habit formed in response to specific stimuli.⁴⁵

This faculty could represent the way in which the reversed hierarchy between the craftsman and his or her tools might compel factory labourers to recall and apply the techniques of their vocation. But because external forces alone dictate the memories that allow such actions to be performed, the process would limit

⁴³ See chapter one, pages 34 – 37. Also, see “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, 2003, pp 328 – 329.

⁴⁴ Andrew Benjamin: “Tradition and Experience”, 1989, p130.

⁴⁵ Henri Bergson: *Matter and Memory*, 1988, pp 150 – 151.

the impressions of those activities to the precise instance in which they were triggered by events on the production line. As such, the worker's experience of their toil would be limited to the fragmentary mode of *Erlebnis*, as the duties they perform will be accessible only in a specific moment of their life.⁴⁶ Hence, unlike the dialogue between storyteller and listener, they become participants in a process of repetition that does not grant them conscious possession of the information they receive.

Therefore, if the art of storytelling will expire only when the ability to conserve and exchange knowledge fails,⁴⁷ it can be argued that mass-manufacture contributes to its demise by decimating experience as *Erfahrung*. As Benjamin concluded, just as the processes of industrial labour are distinct from those of handicraft, so to does the method of informational communication that corresponds to industrial labour oppose the storytelling or collective exchange that corresponds to artisanal production.⁴⁸ Moreover, because storytelling requires the preservation of impressions in the mind of both narrator and receiver, its dissolution in the age of high capitalism reflects Benjamin's claim that the process that triggers the atrophy of experience emerges from an economy focused upon the production of commodities.⁴⁹

IV: The Passer-by.

For Benjamin, the worker's plight spilled out onto the Parisian boulevards. Indeed, following Poe's *Man of the Crowd* Benjamin remarked that the pedestrian wears a smile to greet passers by, the automatic formation of which echoed the mechanical agitation of the machine operator's limbs.⁵⁰ As Poe writes of the city dweller, whenever they find their progress blocked by the masses that

⁴⁶ Andrew Benjamin: "Tradition and Experience", 1989, pp 130 – 132.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin: "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935 – 1938*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, pp 143 – 144.

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [m3a,5], 1999, p804.

⁴⁹ Ibid: [m3a,3], p804.

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 2003, p329.

congregate on the urban walkways they will stand, allow an unconscious smile to form across their lips, and wait for a path to clear before them.⁵¹

Clearly, this habitual act can be likened to Bergson's notion of memories that trigger "appropriate" reactions to external forces. However, to fully explore the synchronicity between city dweller and labourer we must refer to Baudelaire's 'A Une Passante' (1861). For as Andrew Benjamin observes, in this piece the poet evokes the ephemeral encounters staged by a metropolis in which experiences do not become objects of "conscious recognition".⁵²

The setting for the poem is a cacophonous city street, on which is played out a chance encounter between the poet and a female passer-by. Baudelaire is struck by her beauty, and gazes as she elegantly raises and swings the hem of her dress, as if to avoid contact with the dirty ground underfoot. Yet the wonderment born of this ephemeral meeting is short lived. Amid the chaos of the metropolis the passing figure is soon gone, and the poet is left with the realisation that he may never again see the woman with whom he has become intoxicated. All he can do is mourn the loss of a love, and a happiness, that might have been.⁵³

For Benjamin, 'A Une Passante' is a work that has been composed through the "veil" of the city. As he notes, at no point in the poem are the masses mentioned directly, yet their presence is always inscribed on the series of events that unfold. As such, we might claim that the poem in question offers clear evidence to support Benjamin's claim that Baudelaire had no need to overtly describe the swarming throng of consumers that populated Hausmann's city because their significance to his work was implicit.⁵⁴ The city's presence is even inscribed onto the figure who gives the work its name. Benjamin reasoned that an identikit image of the passer-by could be gleaned from Proust's description of a "pallid, ardent Parisian", who appears etiolated by a lack of clean air and the dense atmosphere created by the crowds.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Edgar Allan Poe: "The Man of the Crowd", in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Complete Stories*, London, David Campbell Publishers LTD, 1992, p443.

⁵² Andrew Benjamin: "Tradition and Experience", 1989, p132.

⁵³ Charles Baudelaire: "To A Woman Passing By" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, p189.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, p322.

⁵⁵ Marcel Proust: *La Prisonnière*, Paris, 1923, vol. 1, p138, quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, [J90a,5] 1999, p384.

Crucially, Baudelaire's meeting with this figure is a portrayal of love at last rather than first sight. By expressing the crisis of "sexual shock" that could only afflict an individual who is isolated and cut off from human contact, 'A Une Passante' betrays the impact that life in the metropolis has upon love. As Benjamin put it: the poet's body contracts as if in the grip of some profound tremor, a sensation fostered by the tension between the emotional pain of "farewell" and the promise of "enchantment" implied by the verse.⁵⁶ Furthermore, because both emotions are limited to the intense duration of the encounter – and then lost as the passer-by leaves his sight – we can only conclude that endless cycles of enrapture and sadness await the writer as he paces the capital. Each and every time the poet isolates a figure from the confusion around him, he will be compelled to engage these feelings anew.

Such temporality casts Baudelaire's subject as the ephemeral sensation of *Erlebnis*, the fragmentary moment that holds no relation to what has gone before. This idea can be clarified against Bergson's avowal that the present exists only as "duration". As the philosopher reasoned, the defining feature of time is that it passes; time that has gone by is the past, and the present is the moment of its lapsing.⁵⁷ The intense climate of the Second Empire subjected Baudelaire to a similar conception of the here and now. His reality was a web of transitory incidents that became past events in the instance of their unfolding. A situation compounded by the pleasure principle's limitation of the subject's capacity to retain mental images of events beyond the precise moment in which they took shape. As such, the poet bore witness to encounters that could not be assimilated into *Erfahrung*. The link between Factory floor and city-street is thus confirmed. Like the former, the latter was an environment in which long held experience was supplanted by immediacy.

For Benjamin, the "loss" engendered by this decline was so ingrained in Baudelaire that he identified it as a major theme of his work.⁵⁸ Undoubtedly, it formed the basis of his war against the crowd, a conflict waged between a struggle to absorb and evoke impressions of Paris while simultaneously defending himself against the capital's visual assault. In this context, we might

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 2003, p324.

⁵⁷ Henri Bergson: *Matter and Memory*, 1988, p137.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, p333.

advance the methodology of stumbling over words evoked by ‘Le Soleil’ and suggest that the poet worked in a manner that could be considered a form of combat in which he duelled with the excitations strewn forth by Parisian streets in order to wrest a verse from the chaos around him. The fight to capture the particular sensation of love unique to the city dweller can be associated with this exact project.⁵⁹ In defiance of the conditions of modernity, ‘A Une Passante’ represents an attempt to retain the fragments of everyday life for the performance of poetry, to recapture and contemplate that which is lost in an instant.⁶⁰

Moreover, we can use this framework to elucidate the unresolved issues posed in relation to Manet. For example, we have seen how Manet’s impressions of Paris were recorded through fleeting, non-contemplative, acts of vision, and have attributed such encounters to the swarming spectacle of Haussman’s metropolis. Likewise, the instantaneous reception enacted by his art was identified as an attempt to evoke sensations arising from this environment. Yet it was also noted that a more precise description of the artist’s psychological response to his surroundings was needed to account for this interplay between location, image and beholder. We can now attribute such phenomena to the fact that Manet was compelled to encounter his environment through the splintered experience of *Erlebnis*.

The rapid, shifting glance through which he engaged his surroundings was necessitated by a landscape that fostered a ceaseless influx of stimuli. Like the intense sensorial assault of the factory, Haussman’s Paris staged an onrush of energies that had to be neutralised in order to numb the danger of psychic trauma. Accordingly, the pleasure principle would intervene and compel individuals to live through the events of everyday life in a restricted, momentary manner. As an inhabitant of the capital, Manet would gain first hand exposure to this transformation in perceptual experience. Consequently, because the fragments of empirical life would no longer form lasting traces within his memory, he was left with little choice but to see and render instantaneously. There was simply no other way in which modernity could be engaged.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p324.

⁶⁰ Andrew Benjamin: “Tradition and Experience”, 1989, pp 129 – 132.

V: *Menzel*.

Crucially, the ideas and perspectives Benjamin developed to discuss the crisis of experience faced by Baudelaire can be applied to the work of another artist: the German painter Adolph Menzel. Indeed, it is my contention that not only can Menzel's practice be contextualised in relation to Benjamin's critical framework, but also that changes in his art parallel the fluctuations in experience the philosopher described.

Like Benjamin, Menzel was a native of Berlin. Yet from birth his slight stature had cast him as an outsider. He was only four feet six inches tall, and the stark reactions that greeted his appearance embittered him against social interactions beyond his circle of friends. In addition to this, there is a further physical trait that distinguishes the artist. Menzel was ambidextrous, and commentators have famously described him "alternating hands" as he worked. For Michael Fried, this skill underpinned his prodigious draughtsmanship, a talent he employed to create an "art of embodiment" in which the viewer is frequently compelled to attempt acts of imaginative projection analogous to those undertaken by the artist in the course of his work.⁶¹ Exploring this motif against the social and cultural formations of the nineteenth century will show how closely Menzel's painting echoes the themes addressed by Benjamin's work. But in order to appreciate the interplay between the discourses, it is necessary to first identify the principles that underpin the "art of embodiment".

Menzel's pencil sketch, *The Scarfgraben Flooded* (1842 – 43), proves helpful to this task. The composition depicts the scene of a flooded river, with the drawing itself divided into four distinct zones: the background of a far shoreline; the two middle zones – where poplar trees and ramshackle wooden fencing border the reeds that break the waters surface – and finally the half submerged tree stumps of the near distance. Taken together, these areas combine to form what Fried calls the "lived perspective" of the image. Key to this claim is the fact that each zone is constructed around an "angle of vision" that becomes steeper as the viewer's eye reaches the foreground. Crucially, this effect allows the picture to re-create the shifting, "downward looking" glance with which an individual

⁶¹ Michael Fried: *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth Century Berlin*, London, Yale University Press, 2002, pp 9 – 13.

would have explored the location in empirical life. Accordingly, because the beholder's sight moves in harmony with this gaze, they are compelled to imagine that they are the "embodied viewer" suggested by the composition, forming a link that underpins the act of corporeal projection. In their mind the observer ceases to be an external onlooker. Instead they become a bodily presence within the image itself, a figure able to explore first hand the landscape that the artist has captured.⁶²

Menzel did not limit this technique to his drawing, as the *Garden of Prince Albert's Palace* (1846/1876) testifies. Here the beholder's viewpoint approximates the raised balcony from which Menzel made the work: a vantage that forces their eyes to plunge downwards into the painting. The palace grounds and sleeping workers of the foreground confirm this assumption, as they are all seen from above. However, the tall trees that flank the garden intervene and redirect the observer's sight towards the topmost branches that scrape the clouds overhead. The leaf-shrouded railings of the garden's perimeter, and the light coloured buildings beyond, convey a further perspective. These background zones are seen from a more lateral angle, suggesting that the spectator's aspect becomes flatter as they look towards the distance. Again, by combining disparate acts of looking in a single composition, the image gives the impression of an embodied subject who cranes their neck and shifts their gaze as they explore the scene before them. To view the canvas is thus to imagine that you stand beside Menzel as he works and see into the space he depicts.⁶³

In this context, it is possible to interpret Menzel's practice as a system in which the spectator is always an implied presence in the composition, regardless of its subject matter.⁶⁴ This conception is particularly applicable to the artist's still lives, which evoke latent corporeality by depicting objects that bear traces of bodily contact. *The Unmade Bed* (1845) confirms this claim; its crumpled pillows and creased duvet retain impressions of the form that previously lay upon them, appearing almost moulded to the contours of the body. Likewise Menzel's

⁶² Ibid, pp 19 – 20.

⁶³ Ibid, pp 19 – 20.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp 36 – 38.

studies of suits of armour, in which the cumbersome metal outfits appear to move under their own will, as if haunted by the ghost of human presence.⁶⁵

This notion of material things being brought to life by traces of human touch yields an uncanny effect. As with the artist's landscapes, Menzel's suggestion of a bodily presence permeates the mind of the beholder and encourages them to envisage their own interaction with the image. A notable example exists in *Molke's Binoculars* (1871), the compositional structure of which implies the existence of an unseen operator who studiously uses the item in question. Indeed, Menzel's careful rendering of the thumbscrews used to focus the apparatus compels the observer to enter the scene, pick up the object and raise it to their eyes. Such interplay is continued through his studies of bicycles – the composition of which evokes the absent rider and the rhythmic actions of their limbs as they drive the pedals forwards – and his pictures of violas, which appear to be supported by the hands of an invisible musician who cradles the instrument's neck, plays its strings and carefully tunes them to the correct pitch. Again, the animating presence encourages the audience to visualise themselves within the composition, using the items as an embodied spectator.⁶⁶

Moreover, this combination of lived perspective and bodily projection yields a further, temporally determined, mode of experience. The 1844 drawing *Dr Phulmann's Bookcase* is key to expounding such claims. In this work, the artist portrays the Doctor's books, journals and pamphlets as objects that are frequently opened and read. This active use is particularly evident in the random, haphazard arrangement of the texts themselves. The impression given is that each manuscript is regularly picked up and returned, suggesting that, like Benjamin's own library, Phulmann's books are not "touched by the mild boredom of order".⁶⁷

As before, these traces of human contact invite the observer to become an embodied spectator. In their imagination, the viewer approaches the bookcase, selects a volume and surveys its contents. But unlike other works, this activity discloses a passing of time. As Fried comments, the composition reveals the "lived" time that has elapsed between the Doctor and his books, the periods of

⁶⁵ Ibid, p41/pp 55 – 57.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p50.

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin: "Unpacking My Library", in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927 – 1934*, 1999, p486.

study and research that have characterised his relationship to them. In other words, the temporality of the image suggests that the books possess the traces of an “inner history”, which began when Dr Phulmann first purchased the items, and grew with each and every act of use.⁶⁸

The concept of “inner history” here employed is taken from the second volume of Søren Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* (1843), a text that features a critical discussion of aesthetics. For Kierkegaard, our insight into notions of aesthetic beauty has been clouded by the predominance of several misunderstandings. Specifically, the philosopher reasoned that such confusions could be attributed to the fact that although the idea of aesthetic gratification is traditionally contextualised against the sensations encountered when beholding works of fine art, there have been very few attempts to expand our reading of the phenomenon beyond this narrow interpretation. To solve this dilemma Kierkegaard thus suggested that we might begin to consider everyday life or commonplace activities as an extended form of the aesthetic.⁶⁹

The idea that the everyday might represent an aesthetic category prompted Kierkegaard to suggest that the truly beautiful is a phenomenon formed over time and not something that takes shape instantaneously. Such claims presuppose a link between aesthetics and history, or more specifically a link between aesthetic beauty and an “internal history” in which every single moment is imbued with great importance.⁷⁰ Based on these arguments, Kierkegaard called for a creative practice that would focus entirely upon temporal categories. As he argued, when one studies the notion of aesthetic beauty – be it from a dialectical or historical standpoint – the resulting conclusion will state that throughout its evolution our critical understanding of the aesthetic has negated spatial concerns and has come to focus upon the issue of time. This means that in order to perfect the practice of fine art one must likewise forsake notions of space and instead engage temporal motifs.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Michael Fried: *Menzel’s Realism*, 2002, pp 141 – 143.

⁶⁹ Søren Kierkegaard: *Either/Or Volume II*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974 p135. (See also Fried’s discussion of Kierkegaard in *Menzel’s Realism*, pages 144 – 148.)

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp 135 – 137.

⁷¹ Ibid, p139.

To accommodate this model, painting would have to depict motifs such as “patience” which, as Kierkegaard put it, cannot be expressed in an instant.⁷² Therefore, artists would have to portray not a series of isolated fragments, but a subject commensurate with sequential continuity. Crucially, the process of continual scholastic endeavour expressed by *Doctor Phulmann’s Bookcase* achieved this exact feat. It represented something that happened everyday, over numerous years, thereby expressing temporal progression. Furthermore, the experiential structure of Menzel’s drawing allows this timeline to advance. In the viewer’s mind, the Doctor takes a book down from his shelf and perpetuates the inner history of study and research further still.⁷³

VI: Empathy.

Fried argues that, taken together, such works foster an “aesthetic of empathy”, a claim informed by the critic’s reading of Robert Vischer. To some extent, the category under discussion bears similarities to the perceptual sensations Nesbit located in Atget’s work. However, as will be outlined below, the implications suggested by Menzel’s empathy are far greater in their significance.

Specifically, Vischer sought to theorise the empathic against the body’s response to dreams; his central proposition being that “certain stimuli in dreams” prompt the body to objectify itself in material things. In essence, he believed that human imagination granted individuals the magical ability to project and unite their own physicality with external forms.⁷⁴ But for such unity to be formed, a defence against stimuli must not obscure the sensations cast by the object of perception. Rather, as with *Erfahrung*, they must permeate the consciousness of the beholder.

‘The Aesthetic Act and Pure Form’ (1874) advanced this reading by equating empathy with notions of an emotional interplay between subject and object of contemplation. As Vischer avowed, bringing “psychological life” into contact with every external phenomena that the viewer can experience “aesthetically”

⁷² Ibid, p138.

⁷³ Michael Fried: *Menzel’s Realism*, 2002, p148.

⁷⁴ Ibid, pp 36 – 38.

creates a mode of vision able to direct and change an individual's moods and feelings.⁷⁵

Such encounters begin with the beholder placing himself in a “simple and essentially unilateral relation” to an external form. This can be achieved in two ways, either he approaches the item and fixes his gaze upon it, or, as Vischer comments, the object attracts the attention of the subject and is subsequently absorbed into their inner being. This idea becomes key to the writer's thesis, for through such meditation he claims to receive “the external impression of the object” into his eye, and thus into his imagination or mind. However, the next act he describes has a distinctly Freudian tone. Anticipating the response to stimuli described in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, Vischer argued that once the object is absorbed, its energies act upon the subject, and may cause them feelings of pleasure or repulsion.⁷⁶ As noted above, Freud maintained that such excitations fostered a psychical need to balance positive and negative impulses, but for Vischer engaging these sensations allowed the spectator to see their double – the “photographic image” of their mood – materialise in the spectacle before them.⁷⁷ As he explains, the light waves and excitations that flow out from any given object, for example the moon, will seep through the onlooker's eye, into their “central nervous system”. Thus if an individual gazes intently at the moon they will find that their imagination and emotions are driven into a state of arousal influenced by the sight of the lunar globe and the “bluish-white” glow that it casts upon the earth's surface.⁷⁸

In other words, the beholder's reverie triggers an entwining of “aesthetic perception” and “mental association”. As the subject views natural or man-made forms, images, thoughts and feelings that are not present in the object of contemplation – but are inspired by the stimulative effects it prompts – will be aroused in their mind. Vischer himself confirms this. Speaking of the moon once more, he describes how gazing upon its silvery circumference might inspire a sentimental response because it evokes memories of a loved one who would sing or vent their emotions in its presence, or because it is the heavenly body that

⁷⁵ Robert Vischer: “The Aesthetic Act and Pure Form” in *Art in Theory: 1815 – 1900*, edited by Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, 2003, pp 690 – 691.

⁷⁶ Ibid, pp 690 – 691.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p691.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p691.

symbolises a contemplative and restful dimension of human existence. The precise nature of the impressions suggested by a particular spectacle will differ from person to person, but the effect of seeing their “conscious second self” coalesce with the thing on which they look represents a universal outcome for each and every participant in this process. Because the object influences the observer’s imagination and governs their emotions, Vischer argues that the subject will see a projection of their mind, and thus an image of their bodily form, materialise on the object’s surface. In the critic’s analysis, it is where this connection is manifest that the experience of empathy will be felt at its fullest.⁷⁹

Consequently, as the viewer explores the compositional structure of Menzel’s practice, we can reason that their patient reflection will yield sensations analogous to those discussed above. Like the protagonist of Vischer’s thesis, the observer will see their second, imagined self combine with the object of their perception, forming an empathic link between artwork and beholder.⁸⁰

VII: Alexandrite.

However, Vischer also reasoned that works of art would stage such a response only if the artist first experienced their subject through the sensory matrix of empathic vision. That is, the artist had to view the everyday through the same meditative contemplation that allowed the beholder to perceive their likeness in the world around them. In this context, the execution of creative practice becomes something that cannot be achieved by perception alone. On the contrary, the artist has to open his emotions, moods and feelings to the influence of the object before him.⁸¹

A vivid illustration of this process exists in ‘The Storyteller’. In the final section of the essay Benjamin describes a tale called ‘The Alexandrite’, a work that reveals Leskov’s “mystical” response to things. The fable is narrated through the voice of “Wendell”, a gem engraver who worked in the time of Czar Alexander II. As the story unfolds, we learn that Wendell meets the Czar, whom we are told wears a ring set with the eponymous, semi-precious stone. Wendell

⁷⁹ Ibid, pp 691 – 692.

⁸⁰ Micheal Fried: *Menzel’s Realism*, 2002, pp 38 – 39.

⁸¹ Robert Vischer: “The Aesthetic Act and Pure Form”, 2003, pp 692 – 693.

takes Alexander's hand in a gesture of greeting, yet as he does so the ring catches the light, causing the green chrysoberyl mineral within to flash red. This phenomenon was well documented, but seen through Wendell's eyes it becomes a work of magic. It was once as green as hope, he utters, but now, in the onset of evening, it has become the colour of blood. Indeed, when told the stone was found by a scholar called Nordenskjöld, Wendell cries in defiance that only sorcery could explain its origins, for it seems to foretell the future that awaits its bearer. As he pleads to those around him, within the stone a "green morning" has become a "bloody evening", a shift in fortunes that anticipates the dire fate that awaits the Czar.⁸²

For Benjamin, a "remote" passage from Paul Valéry came closest to contextualising the meaning of these words. Integrating the writer's claims into his own argument, he contends that they reveal how artistic vision attains a "mystical depth" when objects of perception are beheld through a union of the "soul, eye, and hand" of the individual who, on viewing external things, finds that he or she is able to evoke them in their own inner self. By contemplating the alexandrite and allowing its energies to colour his feelings and influence his cognitive response, Leskov engaged this exact exchange. He established an emotional connection that, as Benjamin suggests, allowed him to see the rock as a "natural prophecy of petrified, lifeless nature" applicable to the historical and economic climate in which he lived.⁸³ Thus the portentous nature of the green stone turning deep red might have evoked unto Leskov the revolutionary tensions of late nineteenth century Russia precisely because the mineral was named "Alexandrite" in the Czar's honour, forming a link that suggests his life was compelled to follow the bloody path implied by the stone, a prediction fulfilled by his assassination in 1881.

Crucially, such comments offer a context against which the parallel between empathic vision and that of the storyteller can be confirmed. For example, by describing how his double formed in objects of contemplation, and noting that things appear truly real to the beholder only when they become reflections of what he called their "inner life", Vischer echoed Leskov's ability to perceive in

⁸² Walter Benjamin: "The Storyteller", 2002, pp 160 – 161.

⁸³ Ibid, p161.

material forms a mirror of his reality, and by extension an echo of his identity.⁸⁴ Accordingly, if the aesthetics of empathy required the artist to allow stimuli cast by external phenomena to penetrate their mind, it becomes feasible to reason that Menzel encountered his subjects in the same context as Vischer and Leskov. As such, we might argue that his practice was underpinned by something analogous to Baudelaire's "Holy Prostitution of the Soul".

For Baudelaire, the poet possessed the ability to empathise with anything and anyone they wished. As he put it, the poet is almost like a ghost; a wandering, disembodied soul who seeks out corporeal form and thus strives to coalesce with the "character" of any living man or woman.⁸⁵ Similar powers might be ascribed to Menzel. For instance, *Doctor Phulmann's Bookcase* suggests that by engaging the notions of study and solitude evoked by his subject, and allowing those sensations to seep into his mind, Menzel was compelled to imagine himself in the role of the scholar. Thus we might argue that he allowed his "soul" to enter the personality of the individual, and then used information arising from that possession to express the experience of research to the viewer. Likewise, we could reason that when the spectator views Menzel's studies of musical instruments they are able to imagine themselves as musicians precisely because the artist did the same. As he contemplated the contours of the viola, Menzel would have pictured himself holding the object, performing a piece of music, and savouring the rich emotions such acts would trigger within him. The ghostly hands that, in the finished composition, appear to be playing the instrument bear the marks of this fantasy, and hence convey similar sensations to the spectator. Consequently, we can say with conviction that in forging his art of embodiment, Menzel saw reality with the "mystical" intensity of Leskov.

But this is not the only link between the parties. Referring to Valéry once more, Benjamin claimed that it was precisely the union of the soul, the eye and hand that enabled the storyteller to take the raw details of experience and turn them into something the audience could assimilate into their consciousness.⁸⁶ That 'The Alexandrite' was composed through this faculty explains how it was able to transport the listener into an archaic time in which stones dug from the earth or

⁸⁴ Robert Vischer: "The Aesthetic Act and Pure Form", 2003, p693.

⁸⁵ Charles Baudelaire: "The Crowds" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo*, 1991, p44.

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin: "The Storyteller", 2002, p162.

the movements of the planets were readily interpreted as things able to reveal the future.⁸⁷ Clearly, such descriptions can be applied to Menzel's work, for once he had viewed the world with an insight that transcends empirical vision, absorbed the energies cast by its external phenomena and moulded them into paintings that invite empathic seeing, the sensations he encountered were relayed in a way that allowed them to become the experience of the beholder. Therefore, if Leskov takes the content of his tales from experience and then turns those impressions into the experience of his audience,⁸⁸ then Menzel achieves a similar exchange by using paint and pencil to introduce impressions into the mind of the beholder. Consequently, the artist can be considered a storyteller in the Benjaminian sense of the term.

An observation gleaned from the final stages of Fried's study validates this suggestion. The argument in question concerns Menzel's bricklayer image, a motif that connects to many aspects of his work. For example, the physical task of laying one brick after suggests further links to notions of temporal progression and "lived time". Of greater significance, however, were the ideas of the French critic Edmond Duranty, who reviewed Menzel's contribution to the 1879 Munich *International Exhibition for the Arts*.

For Duranty, the most striking aspects of works such as *Bricklayers on Building Site* (1875) was the picture's ability to convey the movements and actions of the tradesmen in a manner that allowed the viewer to empathize with them, to the extent that it could serve to instruct and educate apprentices in the skills of the job. As the writer exclaimed, if Menzel's image represented the only source from which future generations might relearn the skill of bricklaying it would be enough to revivify the vocation in question.⁸⁹ Again, this argument is underpinned by assertions that Menzel's audience does not simply view the images before them, but cognitively engages the sensations they describe. Yet it is the sense of instruction implied by Duranty's claims that cements Menzel's status as a storyteller. Indeed, Benjamin identified an interest in practical concerns as a character trait particular to most storytellers. Equally pertinent was the open or covert desire to instruct and educate the listener in such skills, an

⁸⁷ Ibid, p153.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p146.

⁸⁹ Edmund Duranty: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1st August 1880, pp 105 – 124, quoted by Michael Fried in *Menzel's Realism*, 2002, p129.

assertion possibly addressed to the interplay between collective exchange, tradition and the growth of artisanal skill. In this context, the storyteller becomes a figure who can educate and impart useful knowledge.⁹⁰ For Duranty, Menzel achieved this exact feat in his bricklayer series. As such, his art assumes a close affinity with Benjamin's thesis, a relationship only enhanced by the painter's late works.

VIII: Verona.

In 1884 Menzel painted what Fried has called his last "ambitious" oil painting, the *Piazza D'erbe in Verona*. The work, which details the teeming landscape of a busy market square, marks the conclusion of Menzel's attempt to evoke embodiment through his art. When compared to earlier pieces, *The Piazza* emerges as atypical in its portrayal of crowds that resist all attempts at embodied seeing or empathic projection and thus grant the beholder a limited, detached role. For Fried, this claim can be illustrated by comparing the canvas with an earlier piece, the *Supper at the Ball* (1878), which depicts a grand banquet staged in a resplendent setting. Like the later image, Menzel's main motif is the crowd, but here it is suffused with satire. An official looking man attempting to eat while holding his hat between his legs is but one of many examples of comic incident in the picture. Yet by capturing the official juggling his plates, Menzel encourages the viewer to empathise with the clear difficulty of his task. Such effects are absent in *The Piazza*, prompting us to ask why the artist abandoned his former approach.⁹¹

Fried offers a solution by suggesting that *Piazza D'erbe in Verona* be interpreted as part of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century response to the metropolitan crowd, and the change in social relations it fostered. This claim is strikingly close to Benjamin's description of the shift in experience encountered by Baudelaire, and Fried's use of Georg Simmel's 'Metropolis and Mental Life' (1902 – 03) to defend his claims pulls Menzel ever deeper into Benjamin's orbit.

⁹⁰ Walter Benjamin: "The Storyteller", 2002, p145.

⁹¹ Michael Fried: *Menzel's Realism*, 2002, pp 207 – 209.

Like Freud, Simmel argued that the intense sensory conditions of modernity pressed individuals to develop a psychological defence against stimulation. His assertion that the transitory experiences staged by modernity exhaust a greater share of consciousness than “regular” impressions parallels Freud’s avowal that the battering it receives from onrushing sensations accounts for the central position consciousness occupies within the “shock” defence. Indeed, Simmel’s claim that the rapid and unending stimulation of the senses manifest in daily life would result in the emergence of a protective shield against sensory agitation – the “blasé attitude”, as the writer would call it – confirms the connection between his thesis and that of the Pleasure Principle.⁹²

However, unlike the threat of excitatory energies described by Freud, Simmel’s shield was directed against an excess of social contact. For Simmel, the social interactions of a rural setting – in which an individual will know potentially each and every person they meet over the course of a day, and would have a seemingly “positive” reaction to each encounter – would reduce the metropolitan subject to a state of nervous exhaustion if transferred to the city. The “indifference” of the blasé attitude was thus required in order to preserve a state of distance or estrangement in response to the “close contact” fostered by the crowd. Yet because of this, the blasé subject would experience everything in the metropolis as “insubstantial”, and hence see it as bland and unexceptional. A perpetual state of separation and “aversion” would result from this situation, rendering the individual isolated and aloof from the masses.⁹³

In Fried’s analysis, the conception of modern experience advanced by Simmel echoes that which Menzel would have faced in the growing metropolis of nineteenth-century Berlin, a city of nearly two million people. Hence the panic-stricken tourists who appear overwhelmed by the frantic market square – the incident that provides the dramatic focus of *The Piazza* – can be read as a motif intended to express the stifling and disorientating chaos of the artist’s home town. In these terms, the work’s inability to stage acts of empathic projection can be viewed as part of this evocation, or even interpreted as a response to Simmel’s claim that to stand in an urban crowd is to experience the most intense form of

⁹² Georg Simmel: “The Metropolis and Mental Life” in *Simmel on Culture*, London, Sage Publications, 1997, pp 175 – 176.

⁹³ Ibid, pp 175 – 178.

loneliness imaginable.⁹⁴ Indeed, any artist seeking to evoke the anonymity fostered by the blasé response would have to imbue their work with a sense of detachment. In other words, they would have to encourage the beholder to renounce all attempts at empathy and the sense of intimacy it implies. However, there is a flaw in such arguments. Put simply, Simmel's thesis was written long after Menzel's death, which means the artist would have been unable to read his work. As Fried confesses, it would be a leap of faith to suggest that Menzel intentionally arrested his project of empathic projection in response to the unnerving chaos of the modern city. But he does ask the reader if it is feasible to imagine the artist staging "an involuntary withdrawal of empathy" – that is to say, a failing of his capacity to imbue such figures with a sense of "inner life", such as that achieved in the *Supper At The Ball* – as a reaction to the hectic swarming of the market square?⁹⁵ Approaching Menzel through Benjamin's thesis suggests that this proposition is accurate.

To be sure, the decline of empathy in Menzel can be attributed to the numbing of experience as *Erfahrung* that Benjamin located in the visual saturation of modernity. Key to this proposition is Vischer's claim that, in empathic vision, the individual has to absorb the energy from the shape or figure before them. Likewise, his assertion that such excitations have to engage the beholder's imagination and emotions if they are to experience an empathic merger with the object of their contemplation. Crucially, if we follow Benjamin's reading of Freud, we can only conclude that such interplay would be arrested in the urban metropolis. Amid this environment stimuli no longer pass through consciousness. On the contrary, they ricochet off its surface. The degraded pattern of experience engendered by such protection, which leaves the individual able to claim only momentary recognition of ephemeral impressions, thus suggests that the excitations and energies cast by objects of aesthetic contemplation will no longer pass beyond the subject's eyes. Hence an impression of external phenomena will no longer seep into the viewer's mind, meaning the emotional engagement enacted by such absorption would go unrealised.

Accordingly, when Menzel stood in the swarming space of *The Piazza*, the forced neutrality of the blasé attitude would not only dull the faces of the crowd,

⁹⁴ Ibid, p181.

⁹⁵ Michael Fried: *Menzel's Realism*: 2002, pp 213 – 214.

it would also suspend the artist's capacity to share and assimilate the range of feelings and emotions conveyed by the appearance, mannerisms or attitudes of the people around him. Although the empathic response described by Baudelaire's "Holy Prostitution of the Soul" was patterned upon the poet's interaction with the masses, the frantic swarm of Verona would overload the faculty. There would be simply too many people with which to engage. As such, Menzel's response to the sights and spaces around him would be restricted. Unlike the process that underpinned his earlier works, he would see the market square through vision alone. These limitations would debase the resulting image because, as noted above, artworks will stage empathic sensations only if the artist enacts an emotional exchange with the object of their contemplation, and then expresses the sensations such dialogues arouse within them. Menzel's inability to initiate this process in *The Piazza* thus becomes a decisive influence upon the viewer's peripheral response to the canvas.

Furthermore, there is no possibility of inner history within this temporally fragmented environment, a barrier that would limit Menzel's ability to portray his subject as one that unfolds over hours or days. Again, this can be attributed to the Freudian "shock defence". As Benjamin reiterates, the defining achievement of this faculty exists in its ability to limit the conscious memory of an event to a "precise point in time", albeit at the expense of the impressions that might otherwise be formed by the incident in question.⁹⁶ Hence the phenomenal exchange between past, present and future evoked by *Dr Phulmann's Bookcase* would be inapplicable to a cityscape that reduces sensations of lived time to an instant. Therefore, when the viewer perceives *The Piazza*, they will fail to empathise with the lived experience of events that follow patterns of sequential continuity precisely because there will be none to speak of in an environment composed entirely of single, isolated moments.

Consequently, the loss of empathy in *Piazza D'erbe in Verona* can be understood as symptomatic of Menzel's choice of subject. The only form of embodiment at play in this image would be a psychically determined embodiment of distance and disinterestedness, rather than the corporal unification of previous works. Thus if the succession of *Erlebnis* over *Erfahrung*

⁹⁶ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, p319.

was the transformation Benjamin charged with the decline of storytelling and the individual's ability to absorb and exchange experiences, then Menzel's work reveals how similar experiential and spatial conditions combined to prevent objects of perception directing their energies into the mind, imagination and subjectivity of the artist. Benjamin's avowal that the sensation of empathy is the preserve of the solitary,⁹⁷ and cannot be achieved where limited, truncated modes of experience are dominant,⁹⁸ confirms the destructive impact that urban life had upon this faculty. But there are further implications to be drawn from such conclusions. To engage them requires a return to the concept of aura.

IX: Mimesis.

The link between aura and empathy represents a comparatively unexplored discourse, but the interplay between the two categories is most acute. An initial consideration of the two concepts yields some important connections. Firstly, the contemplative sensations that underpin acts of empathic projection – for example the meditative state Vischer adopts as he lingers before objects of perception – forms a direct parallel to the sensory immersion of auratic experience. The individual who loses himself in the panoramic majesty of a mountain range, or the splendid detail of a sunlight branch, is lulled into a reverie strikingly close to that which envelops Vischer as he looks upon the moon and submits to its energies. In effect, both modes of engagement describe an encounter in which nature is not viewed with any practical intent or interest.

Once this connection is made, it becomes possible to use conceptions of empathic experience to elucidate some of Benjamin's more abstract remarks upon the auratic, in particular his claim that the contemplative register of auratic experience rests upon the transference of an exchange common in relationships between people onto the relationships between individuals and material or natural objects. In this context, the sensory immersion of genuine aura becomes analogous to the captivation encountered when a person's gaze is held and returned by another being. Accordingly, we can conclude to experience the aura

⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [m4a,2], 1999, p805.

⁹⁸ Ibid: [m4a,3], p805.

of an object of perception is to imbue it with the capacity to look back at us.⁹⁹ Such claims imply that objects must possess an echo of human subjectivity if they are to suspend the subject in auratic sensation. But identifying the origins of this trace is problematic, as the debate between Benjamin and Adorno confirms.¹⁰⁰

Responding to Benjamin's 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', Adorno advised that, in his opinion, the "concept of aura" appeared to be inadequately explained, and in the interests of a more concrete definition suggested that it might be associated with the remnant of a "forgotten human moment" in an artefact.¹⁰¹ That the trace in question was thought to derive from acts of labour allows such claims to be contextualised against Marx's avowal that the worker perceives an echo of their consciousness in objects wrought by their own hand. Indeed, if the subject were able to see something of their identity reflected in the item they had made, then their response to it would come to approximate a relationship between people. Yet Benjamin dismissed this interpretation, arguing that as the subject's response to nature provided the archetype for conceptions of auratic experience it would be unfeasible to associate the phenomenon solely with objects of human craft. As he put it, although trees and mountains are capable of holding the onlooker in auratic contemplation, they are not made by human skill. The only conclusion that could be gleaned from this reading was, therefore, that there must be another human element present in objects of perception, an element that does not derive from acts of labour.¹⁰²

It is in response to this dilemma that empathy becomes important. If the contemplative sensations that underpin both auratic and empathic experience can be used to illustrate a connection between the faculties, then the "something human" present in the object of contemplation can be attributed to the imaginative projection that follows acts of perceptual immersion. This assertion

⁹⁹ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, p338.

¹⁰⁰ Charles W. Hauxthausen: "Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein" in *October* 107, Winter 2004, p53.

¹⁰¹ Theodore Adorno *Letter of February 29, 1940* in *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, edited by Henri Lonitz and translated by Nicholas Walker, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 322, quoted by Charles W. Hauxthausen: *ibid*, pp 52 – 53.

¹⁰² Walter Benjamin quoted by Charles W. Hauxthausen, *ibid*, 2004, p53.

cannot be considered speculative, for there are occasions in which Benjamin actively engaged notions of embodiment, notably in relation to childhood.

For Benjamin, infants explore unfamiliar surroundings through acts of impersonation.¹⁰³ He notes how the child does not only play at being a “shopkeeper” or “teacher”, but also imagines themselves to be “windmill” or a “train”. Such transformations represent what Benjamin called the “mimetic faculty”, the capacity to see similarities or interpret “natural correspondences” between people and things.¹⁰⁴ In this way, this merger between subject and object suggests an exchange whereby artefacts gain a “subjectivity” and hence the power to “see” and “look back”. As such, the mimetic becomes a key factor in the formation of auratic experience.¹⁰⁵ However, if this process is the preserve of children, then an equivalent impulse needs to be found to account for the existence of auratic sensations in adulthood. Crucially, the cognitive interplay established by empathy presents a framework through which this can be achieved.

For example, when Benjamin describes an individual who looks upon nature in a state of tranquil reverie, we can reason that as they look upon the far-off mountain range and engage the energies and vibrations cast by that view, the images and associations triggered in their mind would begin the empathic transfer through which the scene became a reflection of their thoughts and feelings. In other words, like the magical interplay that allows an individual’s second self or emotional and mental state to merge with external forms – or the mystical vision that created the emotional link between Leskov and the alexandrite – the vista would become a symbolic echo of the subject. Consequently, the introduction of this subjective element allows the spectator’s response to approximate a relationship between people, for when their eye traces the landscape they will view it not as a collection of topographical details but as a reflection of their mental state. The viewer’s gaze is held as it might be by another person because they see themselves within the object of their meditation. Vischer gave a clear evocation of this effect. Referring again to his

¹⁰³ Esther Leslie: “Stars, Phosphor and Chemical Colours: Extraterrestriality in the Arcades”, in *New Formations*, Number 54, 2004, p14.

¹⁰⁴ Walter Benjamin: “On the Mimetic Faculty” in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, Volume 2, 1927 – 1934, 1999, p720.

¹⁰⁵ Esther Leslie: “Stars, Phosphor and Chemical Colours”, 2004, p14.

contemplation of the moon, he tells how his imagination is suddenly transported to its cratered surface, from where he can gaze down and look with melancholy upon his bodily self.¹⁰⁶ Once established, such interplay would draw the observer ever deeper into immersive contemplation. Seeing their feelings ventriloquized in this manner renders the viewer unable to look away; hence perpetuating the spatial-temporal immersion of auratic sensation.

Crucially, one encounters such experiences in Baudelaire. An initial example emerges in his assertion that foul, repellent creatures are nothing but the animated, embodied form of the unpleasant thoughts harboured by humanity. Such comments bring to mind a mental or emotional unity between the subject and their surroundings. However, a more concrete evocation can be found in ‘L’Homme et la Mer’ (1857), which opens by identifying the ocean as the “mirror” of a free man’s soul. In the rolling waves and dark reaches of the sea, the free man will, Baudelaire contends, perceive the depths of his “bitter” spirit.¹⁰⁷

Crucially, the sea’s capacity to mirror man’s spirit in this manner implies an empathic transfer between human subject and natural world. As the subject contemplates the ocean and allows the sensations cast by its surging waves to shape their mood, the ensuing dialogue will allow the watery surface to answer their gaze with a reflection of their inner most hopes and fears. In this context, the beholder’s meditation imbues the ocean with a subjective quality able to return the gaze cast upon it. Furthermore, by expressing this reciprocity the poem suggests that the individual who opens such a dialogue with their surroundings will begin an exchange that ultimately extends their sensory immersion in time and space. The intimate nature of the connection between subject and sea compels the spectator to look upon the emotional self-portrait that crystallises in the cresting surf before them, thereby advancing their reverie.

Importantly, Benjamin also argued that empathic experience was key to Baudelaire’s practice. He argued that empathy with matter and things was one of Baudelaire’s prime sources of inspiration, and pointed to the second spleen poem – in which the poet declares himself to be both a cemetery scorned by the moon

¹⁰⁶ Robert Vischer: “The Aesthetic Act and Pure Form”, 2003, p692.

¹⁰⁷ Charles Baudelaire: “The Man and the Sea” in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, p33.

and an abandoned room littered with discarded clothes and archaic works of art¹⁰⁸ – to validate his argument.¹⁰⁹ An instance of this interplay between writer and object emerges in the poet's description of a metaphorical unity that can develop between an individual's imagined self and the natural world. Again, this implies that acts of lingering contemplation can result in the beholder becoming one with the thing before them. For example, Baudelaire describes the act of beholding a storm-ravaged tree, and notes that the event might cause his mood to become shaped by the sight of its windswept branches, to the extent that all other traces of his personality are lost. He might feel sadness because the tree conveys lassitude. Moreover, as his contemplation grows this connection might intensify, to the extent that his mind merges completely with the object of his vision.¹¹⁰

As such, when the poet looks upon its leaves and boughs, his mental state will look out towards him, forming a connection that replicates an exchange between people and thus holds him in time and space. Baudelaire will be unable to arrest his meditation because his own emotions and feelings have replaced the tree as the object of his contemplation. Consequently, if aura and empathy are intertwined, we can reason that Baudelaire gave voice to the conditions of auratic experience. Indeed, Benjamin argued that Baudelaire's understanding of this "phenomenon" was such that its disintegration would leave an indelible trace upon his practice.¹¹¹

For Benjamin, evocations of the aura's evanescence occur in the *Fleurs du Mal* as a symbol present in almost every passage addressed to the look of the human eye. Indeed, Baudelaire's verse contains numerous descriptions of eyes that have lost the ability to look.¹¹² A (famous) example exists in 'You'd Entertain the Universe...' (1857), in which the poet speaks of eyes that are lit up like shop windows.¹¹³ This might be read against Benjamin's assertion that in the epoch of modernity, in the "look but don't touch" culture of international exhibitions, the

¹⁰⁸ Charles Baudelaire: "Spleen (II)", 1998, p147.

¹⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin: "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, 2003, p32/p80.

¹¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire: "Poem of Hashish" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo*, 1991, pp 121 – 122.

¹¹¹ Walter Benjamin: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", 2003, p339.

¹¹² Ibid, p339.

¹¹³ Charles Baudelaire: "You'd Entertain the Universe...", in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, p53.

subject is compelled to learn empathy with exchange values.¹¹⁴ Crucially, whoever attempted such a connection would share the purging of individuality, or disavowal of the maker's presence, that underpins the homogenised production of commodities. As such, the subject's gaze would be rendered blank because all their subjectivity would be eroded as they became one with a cold, perfect object. Further descriptions of sightless eyes occur in 'The Blind' (1861), which devotes a whole poem to the subject eyes in which no flash of life is ever seen.¹¹⁵

If empty, vacant eyes are to be considered symbolic of the aura's decline, then we can reason that such arguments refer to a crisis in which natural or man-made objects are divested of the ability to meet the spectator's vision. Undoubtedly, this crisis can be attributed to the shift from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis* enacted by the Pleasure Principle, the influence that eroded the subject's ability to meditate upon and engage excitations cast by the world around them. The teeming climate of modernity would not permit individuals to become lost in a strange weave of time and space, as the limited mode of experience it fosters would render the beholder unable to engage reality through this absorptive state.

With this flow arrested, the dialogue that allows objects of perception to shape the emotions of the beholder would be cancelled. Accordingly, the subject would no longer see their mental state reflected in that on which they look, meaning each and every spectacle they encountered would be divested of a subjective quality and hence purged of the capacity to return the gaze it received. Put simply, the immersive meditation that ensnares the figure who sees in empirical reality an echo of their mood would become obsolete. In this context, the sensory immersion of the auratic would be debased, and the individual who faced the swarming landscape captured by 'A Une Passante' would feel the effects of its debasement. Therefore, when Baudelaire writes of sightless eyes shorn of the ability to look, it is the shift in modes of experience staged by everyday life that he evokes. The modern world would deny the poet access to the reverie through which the ocean became a mirror of his soul.

¹¹⁴ Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, [m4,7], 1999, p805.

¹¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire: "The Blind", in Charles Baudelaire: *The Flowers of Evil*, 1998, p187.

X: Distraction.

The above comments suggest some important conclusions. Firstly, by following arguments that aura and empathy are comparable forms of experience, it is possible to use the auratic as a theoretical framework against which Menzel's practice can be contextualised. Indeed, if Menzel's work hinged upon his ability to first view his subjects empathically – to allow the energies cast by objects of contemplation to shape his thoughts and feelings, thereby allowing a reflection of his emotional self to appear within the structure of man-made or organic forms – we can reason that as he painted he engaged empirical life through the sensory immersion of genuine aura.

Moreover, we can reason that such sensations will be relayed to the beholder. For example, tracing the shifting perspectives and divergent viewpoints conveyed by works such as *The Scarfgraben Flooded* will lull the viewer into a contemplative state that mirrors the lingering meditation of the auratic. Of greater importance, however, is the fact that by compelling the beholder to become an embodied presence within the composition, Menzel's art fulfils a central condition of auratic experience and triggers a reverie through which the subject's response to an inanimate object comes to approximate a relationship between people.

To be sure, the imaginative projection fostered by Menzel's oeuvre imbues his art with a subjective quality precisely because it draws the subject into the composition. For instance, we have noted that as the spectator follows the "lived perspective" relayed by the work before them, they become the embodied presence it evokes. Yet what has not been considered is the fact that by entering the scene in this manner the beholder simultaneously invests it with a human presence able to look upon the physical body beyond the frame. In other words, because the viewer sees their "second self" in the composition, they will follow the examples evoked by Baudelaire and grant external phenomena the capacity to return the gaze it receives.

The subject will be held as if by the look of another because as they envisage the figure who stands in the depicted landscape, or who carefully handles the components of a still life, they will be opening a visual exchange with themselves. Like the figure who finds in the ocean a mirror of their spirit, the

beholder will encounter a projection of their mind amid the seemingly lifeless surface of canvas and paint, forming a link that subsequently holds them in time and space. Therefore, if we follow Miriam Bratu Hansen and identify the aura as a mode of experience that “envelops and physically connects” – and hence removes any distinction between subject and object – thereby transforming perception into a form of sensory embodiment,¹¹⁶ we can argue that the viewer encounters Menzel’s art auratically because his practice engenders a similar fusion of beholder and image. Analogous conclusions can be reached through Adorno, who argued that to “breathe” the aura of a work is to identify with its content, a process that requires the viewer to “externalise” themselves within the composition.¹¹⁷ Crucially, Menzel’s audience achieves this act both cognitively and corporeally.

Furthermore, once the subject becomes a corporeal presence in the artwork, the visual space will become their personal domain, a realm able to generate an experience akin to that of involuntary memory. Consequently, their silent meditation upon particular details – such as the skeletal poplars that flank the swollen river in *The Scarfgraben Flooded* – might begin an exchange that allows such features to influence their state of mind. Like Baudelaire, the beholder may ascribe their “passions” or melancholy to the tree before them, and thus become captivated by the emotional likeness that develops in its creaking boughs. Undoubtedly, this last comment might be construed as speculative. But what cannot be disputed is the fact that if the aura denotes a mode of perceptual experience whereby sensory immersion allows the beholder to see their self-image merge with objects of perception – opening a dialogue that lulls them ever deeper into silent contemplation – then the sensations enacted by Menzel’s art clearly approximate the auratic.¹¹⁸

Secondly, if an erosion of the subject’s capacity to stage an empathic transfer with their environment is indicative of the aura’s destruction, then the social

¹¹⁶ Miriam Bratu Hansen: “Benjamin’s Aura” in *Critical Enquiry* Vol. 34 No. 2, winter 2008, p351.

¹¹⁷ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, pp 384 – 387.

¹¹⁸ Reconsidering the above description of the empathic sensations staged by Atget’s photography engenders the possibility that his work could also be considered a practice that fosters auratic experience, a claim that suggests that his relationship to the critique of the aura is more complex than Benjamin anticipated. The implications of this proposition are beyond the scope of this chapter, but will be addressed in the conclusion to this thesis. See pages 222 – 227.

climate against which Menzel completed his late works can be charged with the phenomenon's decline. The surge of fragmentary impressions cast by *The Piazza* would deny the reverie through which an emotional dialogue could be opened with external forms. Therefore, when Menzel entered this space he would be unable to access the contemplation through which a reflection of his moods and feelings might take shape in his surroundings. Thus, unlike the figure absorbed in the beauty of nature, there would be nothing compelling him to indefinite sensory immersion. Hence he would not encounter the lingering meditation of the auratic.

Furthermore, beholding the image born of this environment would yield similar outcomes. Because the sensory landscape of *The Piazza* debased Menzel's empathic vision and fostered a work in which the observer could not project their imagination, the factors that previously held the spectator amid the contemplative web of auratic experience – namely their ability to unite themselves, and by extension their emotions, with the composition – would be suspended. Unlike earlier pictures, the close personal connection between viewer and image would not evolve; hence the canvas would not lull its audience into a strange weave of time and space. Consequently, because this loss stems from the painter's response to the visual saturation of the modern, we can situate Menzel's practice in line with claims that perceptual transformations staged by works of art are patterned upon the perceptual landscape of empirical life.

This idea of artworks re-staging the visual conditions of the everyday was something Benjamin became increasingly focused upon. Reflecting on the issue he called for works able to school onlookers in the experience of the city. Undoubtedly, the envisaged practice would have to refuse all forms of reverie. Yet it would have to do so as a conscious intention, not as an indirect response to the environment against which it was formed. Such goals would be achieved by engendering a state of "distraction", a sensation that would neutralise the painting's "medusa-stare".¹¹⁹

Initially, this conception would be illustrated through Dada, a movement distinguished by its "uselessness for contemplative immersion". As Benjamin put it, the beholder would find it impossible to engage a painting by Arp or a poem

¹¹⁹ Fredrick J. Schwartz: *Blind Spots*, London, Yale University Press, 2005, p73.

by August Stramm in a state of quite contemplation.¹²⁰ Yet the philosopher believed that history possessed a more instructive example of such encounters. It would be in architecture that he located the origins of a mode of reception analogous to that fostered by distraction. For Benjamin, buildings were not engaged through meditative acts of vision. On the contrary, they were assimilated through “use and perception” or by touch and sight. In other words, there were both visual and “tactile” dimensions to their comprehension. Tactile was Benjamin’s term for an appropriation achieved by habit rather than attention, suggesting that architecture was experienced through regular movements, by observing the object in an incidental manner. Wherever this mode of reception was dominant, the sensory register of empathic projection would be reversed. Rather than becoming assimilated unto the spectacle, the “distracted mass” would absorb the object before them; hence they would have no opportunity to attempt acts of corporeal projection.¹²¹

To identify how artworks might relay such sensations demands a return to the Soviet avant-garde and the work of Lazar Mordvich Hovich Lisitskii, the Russian Constructivist artist more famously known as “El Lissitzky”. This name change holds fundamental importance in the context of the issues at hand. “El” was taken from an “epigraph” to *New Systems in Art*, a book written by Kasimir Malevich and subsequently published through the Vitebsk based “Free Art Workshops”. Like Malevich, Lisitskii belonged to the UNOVIS group based in the Belarusian town, the members of which collectively defined themselves “affirmers of new forms in art”.¹²² Lissitzky’s work of the early 1920’s – which in the artist’s words explored the “imaginary space” of the “non optical”, the realm that existed beyond the empirical world – embodied this manifesto.¹²³

Such commitments were driven by twin impulses: a rejection of the “traditional, monumental and pictorial artwork” favoured by the museum and an attempt to free the beholder from the fixed viewing position such practices engendered. In this context, Lissitzky’s goals can be interpreted as the realisation

¹²⁰ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)” in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, 2003, p267.

¹²¹ Ibid, p268.

¹²² T. J. Clark: *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From A History of Modernism*, London, Yale University Press, 1999, pp 226 – 229.

¹²³ El Lissitzky: “A. and Pangeometry” in *Art in Theory: 1900 – 2000*, 2003, p318.

of images that assert an active, non-meditative response.¹²⁴ The artist's "*Prouns*", an acronym of the phrase "Proekt Utverzhdenniia Novogo" or "Project For The Affirmation of The New",¹²⁵ attempted this exact task.

The *Prouns* were a series of abstract pictures that oscillated between the flatness of painting and the spatiality of architecture. For example, in *Proun IE* (1919 – 1920) the observer is confronted with a series of shapes that evoke both a building schematic and a non-figurative canvas. Perhaps the work's defining feature is the fact that it does not offer the beholder a single point of view, and instead forces the eye into a state of constant movement across the image.¹²⁶ As Victor Margolin contends, the observer does not linger before the composition but moves through it, taking divergent pathways that synthesize a total image composed of discrete parts.¹²⁷

Lissitzky's art thus correlates with Benjamin's conception of distracted vision, and hence with the feat of being able to see whilst active; a concern that became increasingly relevant in the sensory realm of modernity.¹²⁸ As such, the philosopher was emphatic in his belief that the tasks that faced the perceptual apparatus of a person living in the early decades of the twentieth century were tasks that could not be resolved by mere contemplation.¹²⁹ In other words, the possibility of dwelling on a single phenomenon was no longer viable amid the chaos and flux of modern life. On the contrary, a form of "practiced vigilance" was required to follow the frenzied congestion of the everyday.¹³⁰

The discourse of "psychotechnics" was developed in response to this situation. Pre-dating modern psychology, leading "psychotechnicians" such as Richard Hamburger and Fritz Giese asserted that the successful completion of motor tasks hinged upon the sense organs, the eyes in particular, rather than muscles. Such ideas proved vital to emerging industries, notably the railway. An essay C. Heydt contributed to *Industrielle Psychotechnik* in 1924 illustrated this with

¹²⁴ Fredrick J. Schwartz: *Blind Spots*, 2005, pp 55 – 57.

¹²⁵ Victor Margolin: *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy 1917 – 1946*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p22.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p35.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p32.

¹²⁸ Fredrick J. Schwartz: *Blind Spots*, 2005, p57.

¹²⁹ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p268.

¹³⁰ Howard Eiland: "Reception in Distraction", in *Walter Benjamin and Art*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, 2005, pp 6 – 7.

respect to the signalman, a figure whose occupation was mostly executed whilst in a state of motion. As Frederic J. Schwartz notes, a parallel exists between the city dweller struggling to capture information as they move through the metropolis and the individual required to read unclear signs on passing trains and point them towards their correct destination. Visual cognition was thus vital to the job, prompting the development of strict evaluative procedures. One such test featured the “tachistoscope”, a projection apparatus used to display a rapid sequence of city names. Applicants were required to identify each word in the stream, a task complicated by the use of intentionally indistinct text. Indeed, the rigour of the examination was pre-meditated in order to reflect the high stakes of the profession, for if misdirected an errant train would not only obstruct further travel, but would endanger human life”.¹³¹

For Benjamin, the development of reception in distraction was key to negotiating such dangers. Referring again to the habitual, tactile perception staged by architecture, he claimed that a distracted individual is able to form habits. A claim that subsequently informed his view that if an individual were able to master a given task whilst in a state of distraction, the achievement will prove that the solution to the project in question rests upon the ability to develop a habitual response to stimuli.¹³² Underpinning this argument was a distinction between contemplative and active states of mind. By dispersing conscious attention, distraction comes to represent the cognitive state of a “competent, experienced practitioner or technician”. Such a figure would possess the ability to assimilate stimuli, think and act in an instant without placing undue focus upon events around them.¹³³ Clearly, this faculty would be indispensable to the signalman, and for Benjamin one creative discipline in particular was key to nurturing its growth. As he argued, it was in film that the observer would find a training ground in which he or she could become exposed to a sensation analogous to the intense perceptual shocks that had become increasingly manifest in all areas of daily existence.¹³⁴ In other words, film’s ability to instruct its audience in the sensory alertness demanded by everyday life hinged upon the

¹³¹ Fredrick J. Schwartz: *Blind Spots*, 2005, pp 66 – 67.

¹³² Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p268.

¹³³ Fredrick J. Schwartz: *Blind Spots*, 2005, p73.

¹³⁴ Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)”, 2003, p269.

medium's ability to stage an onslaught of sounds and images equal to those fostered by modern urban experience.¹³⁵

Montage would be key to such claims, specifically Sergei Eisenstein's "montage of attractions". Eisenstein's art, which evolved from his early career as a set designer and director for the "Moscow Proletkult Theatre", can be distinguished by his experiments with "multiple planes" of stage action. Such techniques allowed each component of the show, including the actors, to be treated as a "separate number", a discrete part that could be integrated into a unified entity.¹³⁶ For Eisenstein, the origins of this approach existed in circus and music hall entertainments, also in the rhythmic structures of Jazz and the films of Charlie Chaplin. What united such forms was the particular mode of reception they demanded. They could not be experienced passively. On the contrary, a state of constant alertness was required to follow the striking web of unexpected elements that constituted a single performance. In Eisenstein's analysis, such spectacles suggested a system whereby the interplay between a work's various parts would generate its overall meaning and it was this process that he sought to replicate.¹³⁷

In this context, the "Montage of Attractions" can be considered a project intended to foster acts of association between a work's individual elements and the themes that provide its critical content. As Eisenstein summarised, a montage sequence will contain one piece that correlates to the themes to be developed by the work, and a second element that relates to the same motif. When these two elements are brought into unison, the juxtaposition will foster an image in which the creative and ideological concerns of the work will be rendered with sharp clarity.¹³⁸

But the perceptual "collision" suggested by this practice also implies that an element of violence was required to elicit the desired reading from the beholder.¹³⁹ This necessitated the drive to foster a state of visual and auditory shock. Attraction proceeded from this exact point. As a theatrical methodology it

¹³⁵ Miriam Hansen: "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology" in *New German Critique* Number 40, Winter 1987, p185.

¹³⁶ Howard Eiland: "Reception in Distraction", 2005, p8.

¹³⁷ Brandon Taylor: *Art and Literature Under The Bolsheviks, Volume One: The Crisis of Renewal, 1917 – 1924*, London, Pluto, 1991, pp 148 – 149.

¹³⁸ Sergei Eisenstein: *The Film Sense*, London, Faber and Faber, 1986, p19.

¹³⁹ Jacques Aumont: *Montage Eisenstein*, London, The British Film Institute, 1987, p43.

represented a combination of every element that engendered in the observer the sensory or psychological impulses that would shape his or her experience. In other words, the montage of attractions combined every detail that could be planned and calculated in order to subject the beholder to a series of “emotional shocks” that would emerge sequentially through the work, thereby drawing the spectator into an emotional state whereby he or she could perceive the ideological focus of the piece.¹⁴⁰

This model clearly opposes contemplative reception. As Tret'iakov argued, attraction placed a pre-meditated pressure on the viewer's senses, and fostered an intense state of anxiousness and alarm.¹⁴¹ In Eisenstein's words, the effects fostered were akin to a heavy agricultural machine ploughing furrows in the audience's psyche into which could be planted the seeds of political ideology.¹⁴² The transposition of this practice from stage to screen likewise demanded a response antithetical to meditation, a response Eisenstein would call “montage-thinking”. Again, the process would function by punishing the audience with a ceaseless influx of stimuli and juxtapositions. As the director put it, any work of filmic art should proceed from an attempt to engender a flow of “emotional shocks” that, when viewed collectively, will suggest the ideas and motifs that the artist has sought to relay.¹⁴³

In his discussion of such practices, Jacques Aumont outlines the techniques used to stage this reaction. Firstly, there was the purely visual effect created by the reproduction of the movement between frames. Secondly, the artificial representation of movement formed by the “straight cut” of a quickly changing montage, a process intended to influence the spectator on both physical and physiological levels. The creation of “emotional combinations” and “psychological *associations*” represented the third method. Finally, there was the “conceptual effect” used to liberate on screen action from spatial-temporal determinants. The scene in *October* (1928) where a Russian soldier appears to be “crushed” by a heavy tank that falls off a production line illustrates this process. Here the interplay between images is wholly cognitive and hinges on the film's

¹⁴⁰ Sergei Eisenstein: “Montage of Attractions” in Sergei Eisenstein: *The Film Sense*, 1986, p181.

¹⁴¹ Sergei Tret'iakov: “The Theatre of Attractions” in *October 118, Fall 2006*, pp 23 – 25.

¹⁴² Sergei Eisenstein: “The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form”, taken from *Kino-zhurnal ARK, nos. 4 – 5, pp 5 – 8, 1925*, in *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov And The Twenties*, edited by Yuri Tsivian, Le Giornate Del Cinema Muto, 2004, p127.

¹⁴³ Sergei Eisenstein: “Letter to the Editor of *Film Technik*, 26th February, 1927, *ibid*, p146.

ability to engender mental connections between seemingly disparate events. As such, it represents the highest evolution of the montage principle, of the potential of individual fragments to combine and provoke an “ideological conclusion”.¹⁴⁴

Benjamin’s faith in cinema’s ability to replicate the psychical conditions of modernity can be thus associated with the rapid shifts and jarring contrasts of Eisenstein’s oeuvre. By compelling his audience to receive and negotiate a series of shocks he effectively schooled the beholder in the perceptual skills needed to survive the everyday. Thus we might argue that the montage of attractions, or the notion of reception in distraction, served to polarise the conclusions that arise from a study of perception informed by Freud’s Pleasure Principle, allowing the experience of shock to be viewed as a progressive force.

Yet because they deny the viewer a passive role and compel them to make rapid intellectual judgements, such works will refute the experience of reverie associated with the auratic. The same conclusions could be applied to the interruption of conventional perspective achieved by Lissitzky’s multi-viewpoint compositions. Indeed, both forms continue the experiences staged by Menzel’s late works. The shifting visual structures that characterise both Lissitzky’s *Prouns* and Eisenstein’s films do not allow the subject to meditate upon a single spectacle. As such, they offer the beholder no opportunity to receive the energies cast by objects of perception into their inner self and hence begin the exchange through which an image of their mood takes shape in the work before them. Consequently, both canvas and celluloid will disavow all forms of empathic sensation, arrest the object’s capacity to meet and return the spectator’s gaze, and thus suspend the interplay that fosters auratic experience.

The Russian avant-garde thus responds to a climate in which the sensory matrix of the auratic has declined by producing works intended to refuse all forms of auratic experience. Accordingly, this represents the second contribution such practices make to the aura debate. In addition to eroding the artist’s status as a figure of genius and arresting the veneration of their craft, the methodologies of Constructivism disrupt contemplative reception by instigating a new perceptual relationship between observer and object.

¹⁴⁴ Jacques Aumont: *Montage Eisenstein*, 1987, pp 157 – 158.

“The Last Reveries: Aura After Art After Benjamin”.

“The Last Reveries”.

I: Pollock.

The fourth chapter of my thesis will advance the study of the auratic to an age beyond that explored by Benjamin’s text. Specifically, I intend to use the critique of the aura as a lens through which to engage the myriad practices that emerged in the decades that followed the Second World War, and thus trace the fluctuating status of the phenomenon across the period in question. Accordingly, I will begin by focusing upon the methodologies of Abstract Expressionism and the work of Jackson Pollock.

For the reader familiar with Benjamin’s writing, the links between Pollock’s work and the qualities inherent to the auratic object appear numerous. An initial connection emerges in relation to the idea that an artwork’s ability to suspend the viewer in the contemplative web of auratic sensation is indebted to the cultic status it receives from its position as a unique item derived from individual creative expression.¹ Undoubtedly, Pollock’s oeuvre can be placed in this context, a claim that can be justified via a consideration of the artist’s action paintings.

Such works can be distinguished by the methodology employed in their creation. The defining characteristic of Pollock’s art is the fact that he allowed his physical movements to become an active, performative component of his practice. In this way, by using his hands to not merely steady his brush but create an impasto dictated by his own muscles and sinews, the painter captured and conveyed what has been called the spontaneous, the self-destructive, the primitive, the free, the existential.² Against the background of such readings it becomes possible to view Pollock’s labour as a conduit for his emotions, a stage

¹ See chapter two, pages 95 – 101.

² T.J. Clark: *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From A History of Modernism*, London, Yale University Press, 1999, p308.

on which his anguish and rage could be revealed in their most primal, untamed form.

A statement the artist drafted in 1947 provides evidence to support this view. Speaking of his work he avowed that his painting “does not come from the easel”, on the contrary its providence was attributed to the “unconscious”. As such, we might reason that Pollock achieved the purest distillation of the principles central to Surrealism.³ To be sure, a parallel might be drawn between the techniques that underpin pieces such as 1950s *Lavender Mist* – in which paint is dripped, poured and thrown across a large floor-based canvas in a manner that seemingly refutes any premeditated programme – and the Surrealist process of automatic writing, a form of “psychic automatism” whereby the author composes a stream of random words and phrases in order to access and release the areas of their consciousness that are inaccessible to willed exploration.⁴ Like the figure attempting this project, Pollock claimed to be unaware of what he was doing as he constructed his images. Each composition was approached as an entity that possessed its own life; a life the painter was committed to unveiling.⁵

But attempts to view the artist’s achievements in this manner have often sparked refutation from those closest to him. One such dismissal surfaced in an interview conducted in 1967 between Bruce Glasner of *Arts Magazine* and Pollock’s widow, Lee Krasner. At one point in the exchange, Glasner directed the discussion towards Pollock’s style of painting, asking Krasner whether the assumption that the artist worked as if in the grip of a wild outpouring of his emotions was accurate. Her response was to undermine such opinions. For Krasner, what was often absent from assessments of her husband’s art was the realisation that as an artist he was a sensitive, intelligent and creative person. Therefore, his practice did not simply unleash a mess of raw feelings. Rather, it gave form to the experience of being an artist and an “aware human being”.⁶

³ Ibid, p333.

⁴ David Bate: *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent*, London, I. B. Tauris & Co. LTD, 2004, pp 54 – 55.

⁵ Jackson Pollock: “Two Statements” in *Art in Theory: 1900 – 2000*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, London, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp 570 – 571.

⁶ Bruce Glasner: “Jackson Pollock: An Interview with Lee Krasner” in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, edited by Pepe Karmel, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1999, p28.

This description provides the impetus for Pollock's inclusion within a certain category of abstraction. Namely, that which Peter Osborne has called the "Kandinsky/Malevich/Mondrian tradition of *spiritual* self-understanding": a project in which the artist is charged with the revelation of "spiritual values" in painterly form. This methodology hinges upon the painter's ability to become a "cipher" for the transcendent, and hence requires individuals blessed with the capacity to intuit the sublime and materialise its essence through the act of production.⁷ In Pollock's work it is the painter's mystical response to the natural world that provides the conduit for such visualisation. Indeed, it has been argued that his black and white pictures represent an attempt to evoke the "feel" of the winter landscape native to Long Island's eastern shores. The sense of freedom suggested by a space in which bare trees yield to the endless grey of the Atlantic is identified as that which the painter seeks to convey.⁸

Accordingly, we reach the conclusion that the value of Pollock's art is entwined not with its visualisation of raw, unfettered feelings, but is determined by the fact that in visualising those emotions his images externalise the mind of a figure imbued with extraordinary creative insight, a figure who views the world with an intensity beyond that of common perceptions and yet cannot evoke such sensations verbally, leaving his work as his only means of communication.

Immanuel Kant's characterisation of the poet is relevant in this context. For Kant, the poet is a figure blessed with the capacity to give transcendent motifs – such as the kingdom of heaven, the mysteries of creation, or the hell of the damned – a "sensible" form. That is, the poet can use their imagination to present such mystical, abstract notions in a form that the reader will be able to perceive and understand, conveying them with a completeness that nature will never be able to rival.⁹ Krasner's portrayal suggests that Pollock possessed the same gifts. Indeed, referencing Allan Kaprow's claim that Pollock's art threatened to initiate painting's replacement with a practice centred upon participation, Benjamin Buchloh avows that far from destroying the medium, the Abstract Expressionists

⁷ Peter Osborne: "Modernism, Abstraction and the Return to Painting" in *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, London, The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1991, pp 63 – 64.

⁸ B. H. Friedman: "An Interview with Lee Krasner" in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews* 1999, pp 36 – 37.

⁹ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgement*, Oxford, Oxford University press, 2007, p143.

were revered as artists of mythic ability.¹⁰ Such arguments subsequently reveal how their work would be received through a sensory immersion analogous to the auratic.

The reverence Pollock attracted intimates that objects born of his hand would engender an equal sense of awe. As the artist and writer Robert Smithson put it: if the sensation of viewing art was once considered akin to acts of worship, then Jackson Pollock and his contemporary American “action painters” have reunited art with a sense of the ritual.¹¹ Because it would be approached as a magical form and received through acts of quiet meditation – a process necessary if the transcendent content relayed by the composition was to be engaged – Pollock’s art would attain the position of a sacred item. Like the statue of Venus that captivated both scholars and clerics alike, each work would become a cultic artefact imbued with the power to hold the spectator in the indefinite weave of time and space crucial to genuine aura. Consequently it can be reasoned that Pollock re-staged the experience Benjamin associated with works that cannot be separated from the brilliance of the artist or their artistic achievement.¹² Furthermore, if this link is continued it becomes possible to consider the painter a drinker of quintessence, a man imbued with skills that derive from some otherworldly source. In this context, the aforementioned link between Pollock and Kandinsky can be confirmed.

For Kandinsky, “spiritual life” could be represented diagrammatically as an “acute triangle” separated into spaces of unequal size. This shape would be constructed so that the smallest regions lay at its highest reaches, meaning that as one travelled downwards the sectors would growth in size and depth. Artists would inhabit each and every subsection, and all practitioners would be united by a defining trait. As Kandinsky reasons, the artist would be identifiable as the figure that sees past the confines of his or her space and who thereby enables the progression of humanity through their innate ability to not only conceive of, but express, a higher reality. Clearly, Pollock may be thought of in such terms and identified as a person who saw past the physical limitations of his own world and

¹⁰ Benjamin Buchloh: “Andy Warhol’s One Dimensional Art” in Benjamin Buchloh: *Neo Avant-Garde and Culture Industry*, London, MIT Press, 2000, pp 479 – 481. The Kaprow reference is taken from “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” in *Art news* 57, No 6 (October 1958), p56.

¹¹ Robert Smithson: “The Iconography of Desolation”, in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, London, University of California press, 1996, p321.

¹² See pages 95 – 101.

glimpsed the absolute, who possessed the wisdom to describe that which cannot be readily explained. Consequently, as with van Gogh's late works, the aura of Pollock's art becomes inseparable from that fostered by his own legend. Pollock's paintings demand a cultic response because they bear the marks of artistic genius; they convey the soul of the man who occupies the pinnacle of spiritual understanding and views the everyday through a lens of "vast sorrow".¹³

II: Autonomy.

However, a parallel line of reasoning emerged which sought to eschew Pollock's classification as a "natural existentialist". Such interpretations aimed to assert the presence of a "questing formal intelligence" as the most important facet of his craft, and hence re-define him as a figure whose prime concern was the creation of the greatest art he could achieve rather than with the portrayal of a "fashionable metaphysics of despair".¹⁴ The legacy of such revisions would be the establishment of Pollock's work as a key point of focus for accounts addressing the issue of artistic autonomy. Such debates hold several implications for the critique of the aura. Therefore, I will offer a succinct definition of the subject before exploring it against the context of my thesis.

It is Clement Greenberg who provides the intellectual framework against which this task can begin. For Greenberg, artists achieved creative perfection only by remaining true to the material qualities of their medium. As he put it, the task would be to make evident not only that which was unique to art in the general sense, but also to explore those elements that were irreducible to individual art forms.¹⁵

To ascertain how this proposal would impact upon painting it is advantageous to first consider a manifesto drafted by Vera Stepanova. In a statement penned in 1919, the constructivist divided all forms of painting into two categories: one positive, one negative. To feature in the plus column works had to display

¹³ Wassily Kandinsky: *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, London, Tate Publishing, 2007, pp 14 – 15.

¹⁴ Michael Fried: "Jackson Pollock" in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, 1999, p97.

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg: "Modernist Painting" in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957 – 1969*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p86.

faithfulness to pure painterly elements, notably space and colour. The minus list, however, was reserved for images that focused on “illusionism” and emotion.¹⁶ So it was for Greenberg. He argued that painters had to develop methodologies that preserved the unique properties of paint. Therefore, their work would have to be flat. It would have to refuse all attempts to stage the effects of *trompe-l’œil*, the illusion of depth and perspective that compels the beholder to imagine that they are gazing upon a three-dimensional space rather than the surface of the canvas.¹⁷

Preoccupation with such details would be replaced by focus upon line and pigment, a project the artist would be urged to explore through non-figurative compositions. For example, speaking of Braque, Mondrian and Miro, Greenberg asserted that the merit of their work was indebted to each artists commitment to achieving invention and innovation in the fields of space, surface, colour and shape at the expense of all subjects unconnected to such factors.¹⁸ Hence the labour of such figures was deemed successful precisely because it engaged the craft of painting alone, because it was self-referential and represented no external motif.

Such claims suggest how an autonomous work is formed. Specifically, an artwork gains autonomy when it submits to the governance of its own internal laws and disavows the influence of all factors that are not specific to its nature. It is thus clear to see why a practice such as Pollock’s, which used the very liquidity of paint as an expressive process, might be integrated into a discourse concerned primarily with material elements of artistic media. Yet there is a certain limitation inherent to such readings inasmuch as they can offer interpretations only from within the context of a strictly defined parameter: namely that of formalism. However, it is possible to break the boundaries of such classifications and view the autonomous artwork as a phenomenon suffused with radical promise. It is this issue that I wish to engage.

By defining Pollock’s oeuvre as a body of work that was not only distant from the world, but which also set it “aside”, Clark provides an apt introduction to the

¹⁶ Christina Kiaer: *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism*, London, MIT press, 2005, p96.

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg: “Modernist Painting”, 1995, pp 87 – 88.

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg: “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgements, 1939 – 1944*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1988, p9.

themes in question. For Clark, this separation from the empirical sphere was indivisible from the apparent rejection of political or cultural motifs engendered by Pollock's painterly abstraction. As he concluded: it would be quite impossible to conceive of an image such as *Number 1* (1948) as a part of the social relations of modernity beyond the unavoidable point that it was made at a given time by a member of the "petty bourgeoisie". Put simply, the only social facet of the work was the fact that its author was a member of society.¹⁹ Such comments suggest that the autonomy inherent to Pollock's art effectively strips it of any critical potential, but this is not the case.

We can elucidate this claim through a return to Theodore Adorno. That the philosopher believed art had to stand in opposition to, and hence rebuff any connection with, existing social relations has already been noted. Yet what we have not explored is the question of how such opposition might be formed. For Adorno, this was achieved first and foremost through the possibility of art's autonomy. Because it existed as a thing-for-itself, the philosopher reasoned that art staged a "tacit critique" of the culture that is becoming a total-exchange society in which all things will exist as a "for-other". In other words, by adhering entirely to its own rules and assimilating no outside phenomena, the artwork would stage an unspoken defiance of capitalist economy by refuting the process of debasement whereby things are stripped of their original meanings and recast as exchange values comprehensible only in terms of their price. By refusing this process the work of art would become an "absolute commodity", a "social product" purged of the notion that it exists for the wider community. As such, the conviction that art's radicalism hinges upon the capacity of painting or sculpture to convey direct political content is shattered. Crucially, if art embodies the antithesis of the "total-exchange society", then the critical potential of the artwork becomes a trait engendered by the object's "immanent dynamic in opposition to society". Consequently, what art contributes to the social sphere is revealed to be not something that can be communicated directly, as with Heartfield's montages, but rather a sense of resistance.²⁰

These observations hold key implications for Pollock. By following Adorno's thesis it can be reasoned that the autonomy intrinsic to the painter's practice

¹⁹ T.J. Clark: *Farewell to an Idea*: 1999, p310.

²⁰ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, pp 321 – 336.

imbued his oeuvre with critical potential precisely because that same autonomy prevented his images from becoming a for-other and allowed each canvas to remain a thing-for-itself. Indeed, that Pollock's work could be viewed as a form of painting concerned with issues pertinent to the medium alone, rather than a practice suffused with political or cultural motifs, suggests that its status as an absolute commodity would be assured.

Of course, the absolute commodity is a contradiction inasmuch as the exchange value of the commodity hinges upon its very value as a utility. As Stewart Martin explains, use values represent the element of the commodity that is exchanged. Therefore, if something ceased to function as a utility it would no longer represent a viable source of exchange value. Thus at the instant in which an artefact became an absolute commodity it would simultaneously cease to be a commodity as such. But this conclusion is not regressive. On the contrary, it anticipates a further economic critique. The commodity that possesses no use value will defy the mechanisms of capitalism precisely because it has no exchange value and hence will not exist as a saleable product.²¹ Consequently, if Pollock's pictures can be considered to be absolute commodities the definition ultimately highlights the political significance of his oeuvre. Because his work was imbued with no apparent use value it would fail to operate as an exchange value and would therefore refute the valorization of capital. Like fire-works, Pollock's paintings could be considered an "empirical appearance free of the burden of empirical being".²² Therein lay their radicalism.

Crucially, the fact that Pollock's art possessed such qualities enables further connections between his painting and the perceptual conditions of the aura to be identified. But to explore this interplay first necessitates an assessment of the exchange operative between the temporal immersion of the auratic and the sensations experienced by the subject who encounters an object of pure beauty. As such, it becomes prudent to consider Kant's work upon the *Analytic of the Beautiful*.

In his deconstruction of Kant, Jacques Derrida notes that the truly beautiful is defined as that which exists "for-itself" and adheres to no external "end". A tulip

²¹ Stewart Martin: "The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity" in *Radical Philosophy* 146 November/December 2007, pp 18 – 19.

²² Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p120.

can be viewed in such terms, and thus interpreted as an embodiment of “free beauty”, because it exists “without a goal” and is detached from any regulation designed to determine the finality of the object. However, these characteristics also hold important implications for the manner in which such forms are received. For example, a botanist could examine the tulip and consider it against a set of premeditated rules, but this process would render him unable to appreciate the bloom as an entity that is beautiful in a pure sense. The scientific premise of his approach would situate the flower within a discourse intrinsically linked to questions of function and genesis; thereby undermining the very notion of how free beauty is formed.²³

Therefore, we are compelled to conclude that assessments of beauty cannot be assigned any “conceptual rules”. As Kant affirmed, if we attempt to judge objects from a conceptual base we will always fail to appreciate their beauty.²⁴ For Derrida, this realisation explains why the discourse of aesthetics addresses the complex issue of pleasure through ambivalence. The aesthetic can be properly identified and enjoyed only when the subject adopts a condition of total “indifference” to external phenomena.²⁵ Indeed, Kant’s thesis develops from the key assertion that in order to ascertain whether or not something is beautiful we must never “relate the representation through reason to the object for knowledge”.²⁶ Hence the faculty for experiencing true beauty becomes one of contemplation, a lingering reverie in which the subject enters a state that seemingly refutes any practical or conceptual interest in the item before them.²⁷ Only then can the beholder attempt a judgement of taste and articulate a subjective response to the object of their gaze.

Significantly, Derrida reasoned that the Kantian notion of free beauty could be found in art, but only when artworks did not follow any external rationale. Thus to acquire the same status as the tulip, the object would have to be “without theme” and “without text”; hence the importance of a practice that exists solely on its own terms. Negating this “without” would be disastrous, as it would condemn art to the lesser category of “adherent beauty”, the “hypothetical

²³ Jacques Derrida: *The Truth in Painting*, London, University of Chicago press, 1987, pp 91 – 95.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant: *Analytic of the Beautiful*, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1963, p18.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida: *The Truth in Painting*, 1987 pp 42 – 45.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant: *Analytic of the Beautiful*, 1963, p3.

²⁷ Andrew Benjamin: *Disclosing Spaces: On Painting*, Manchester, Clinamen, 2004, p27.

beauty” granted to the object that exists to satisfy a particular need or want. Once marked with this classification a painting or sculpture would never attain the pure beauty found in nature. The work would be forever tied to its sense of function, even if that purpose became obsolete.²⁸

Yet if beautiful art is understood to be that which exists without agenda, it follows that the reception of such items would have to be similarly divested of any predefined framework. As Kant observed, although a work of art must be distinguished from the products of nature it must nevertheless follow nature and sever any link between its form and appearance and the rules or regulations that might influence those properties.²⁹

Hence the conditions for engaging such works would echo the response demanded by the beauty of nature. That is, the subject would have to approach the object through a state of lingering, disinterested meditation.

Crucially, the autonomy that marks Pollock’s oeuvre suggests that his paintings could be identified as examples of pure artistic beauty. This classification thus implies that his practice would require the mode of reception proper to the judgement of the aesthetic. In other words, his works would be engaged through a contemplation whereby the viewer takes no practical interest in the canvas. Yet what must also be considered is the fact that such responses form a close parallel to the perceptual sensations of the auratic, which, following Adorno’s reading of Benjamin, we have defined as a reverie patterned upon the immersion generated when nature is not viewed as something to be acted upon.³⁰ Therefore, it can be reasoned that in order to receive the pure beauty of Pollock’s art, the spectator is compelled to experience it through the sensory immersion of genuine aura. That is, the subject must view his compositions in a manner that replicates the disinterested reverie that engulfs the individual who admires the transcendence of nature.

Moreover, it is possible to further elucidate the auratic nature of Pollock’s art. Key to this proposition is Andrew Benjamin’s response to the *Critique of Judgement*. In *Disclosing Spaces*, he argues that although Kant maintained that there could be no conceptual classification to explain the existence of the

²⁸ Jacques Derrida: *The Truth in Painting*, 1987, pp 96 – 99.

²⁹ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgement*, 2007, p135.

³⁰ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory* 1984 p386. (See page 12.)

beautiful – and hence no account of beauty beyond the idea that the beautiful is the object of a “*wholly disinterested* pleasure or displeasure”³¹ – it is nevertheless possible to discern a quality specific to the artefact by exploring our reception of it in greater detail.³²

Underpinning this idea is the fact that the “temporal register” created by lingering engenders a “distancing that is not marked by immediacy”. Or more specifically, a distancing created by the impossibility of forming an immediate comprehension of the object. In this context, Andrew Benjamin contends that what could be retained in the transition from an aesthetics to a philosophy of art is the sense of distancing, and hence the act of spacing, that lingering creates. This assertion suggests two important conclusions: firstly, that the “ineliminable spacing” created by disinterestedness represents a condition that must be fulfilled in order for the beautiful to be experienced, and secondly, the notion that the spacing created by this lingering becomes “constitutive” of the item. In other words, the indefinite meditation experienced by the person who encounters an artefact that cannot be classified in accordance with existing taxonomies will foster a separation between subject and object of contemplation, a separation that allows distancing to be understood as “descriptive” of the object.³³

In effect, the idea presented here is that the beautiful can be defined as an object imbued with qualities similar to those found in the item that fosters conditions of auratic sensation, qualities that are created through the act of beholding. As we have seen, the spectacle that holds the viewer in an indefinite weave of time and space would come to occupy a position of irreducible distance from the beholder. The contemplative immersion inspired by a sacred or mythic form renders that same artefact forever unreachable regardless of its proximity; hence it becomes effectively separated from the everyday. Consequently, because the beautiful demands an analogous meditative response, we can argue that a phenomenal, auratic distance from reality will equally mark such objects.³⁴

Therefore, because Pollock’s oeuvre demands a mode of reception centred upon acts of disinterested lingering we can argue that separation will become a defining trait of his art. Like the purely beautiful, it will always be at a remove

³¹ Immanuel Kant: *Analytic of the Beautiful*, 1963, p12.

³² Andrew Benjamin: *Disclosing Spaces: On Painting*, 2004, p27.

³³ Ibid, pp 27 – 28.

³⁴ Ibid, pp 40 – 41.

from the spectator. Hence, in addition to the ritualistic reception inspired by the cultic status of their creator, Pollock's images will become auratic on a supplementary level because they will always occupy a phenomenal distance from the beholder. Moreover, this distance can be identified as key to the work's critical potential. If autonomous art gains its radicalism by virtue of its inherent opposition to existing social formations, then the distance between subject and object fostered by sensations of perceptual immersion can be identified as the factor that ensures the object remains apart from, and thus resistant too, the empirical sphere. To echo Adorno once more, the void separating the aesthetic and the practical is analogous to the spacing created through acts of contemplation.³⁵ Benjamin's arguments are thus polarised and the aura becomes a phenomenon vital to the artwork's political significance.

III: Distance.

A further example of the distance intrinsic to Pollock's painting can be identified in relation to Adorno's reading of mimesis. In a statement analogous to the Kantian premise outlined above, Adorno reasoned that artworks were interpreted through aesthetic rather than conceptual analysis. But the mode of engagement he envisaged would exceed that of disinterested lingering. For Adorno, the subject's response to a work of art was predicated upon notions of performance and re-enactment. Just as a musician re-creates a musical score by playing the piece in its entirety, so to must the beholder re-stage every detail of the image or artefact. Effectively, the viewer is called upon to mime or imitate the component parts of the composition, becoming assimilated to the object of contemplation in the same manner as the child who mimics the movements of a windmill or a train.³⁶ Such ideas invite parallels with the empathic, particularly when one recalls that mimetic acts render subject and object indistinguishable.

Consequently, because the autonomous, "free" beauty of Pollock's oeuvre implies an inbuilt refusal of assessments attempted from a logical base, Adorno's notion of mimetic interaction emerges as a potential conduit through which the

³⁵ See page 120.

³⁶ Shierry Weber Nicholsen: *Exact Imagination, Late Works: On Adorno's Aesthetics*, London, MIT Press, 1997, pp 148 – 149.

spectator could approach his practice. Crucially, this assertion suggests that his art would stage perceptual sensations analogous to those I have identified in relation to Menzel. Indeed, we might reason that if Menzel's late paintings reveal a crisis that divests realism of its ability to stage empathic reception then Pollock's abstraction provides a conduit through which embodiment and corporeal projection could be continued.

Like the experience Baudelaire evoked in 'L'Homme et la Mer', the observer would engage Pollock's work by submitting to its energies and allowing those impressions to shape their mood, to the extent that a reflection of their feelings materialised in its surface. This point is significant, for only by opening such a dialogue would the spectator be able to re-play the painting in the manner Adorno described. The aesthetics of empathy confirm that an emotional interplay between subject and object of contemplation is essential to the act of assimilation, to the experience that allows individuals to mime or become one with material or natural forms.

Moreover, because Pollock's art called for the beholder to invest the canvas with a human quality able to return the gaze it received, we can conclude that his work fosters an exchange that can be identified as key to perpetuating the lingering reverie of genuine aura. As Benjamin reminds us, the interpretation of the aura as a transference of the social interactions of humanity onto the interactions between people and the natural world rests on the idea of objects becoming imbued the capacity to answer the onlooker's glance.³⁷ Therefore, just as Menzel's audience would be unable to tear their sight from an image populated by a projection of their second, imagined self, the viewer of Pollock's art would be immersed in time and space precisely because as they attempted to re-enact the canvas they would see themselves within the object of their vision.

Yet what must also be emphasised is Adorno's assertion that artworks possess qualities that cannot be assimilated through mimesis alone. Because works of art defy conceptual interpretation – because they can never possess a “discursive meaning” – they can be considered enigmatic.³⁸ As Adorno explained, what art imitates is neither nature nor individual examples of natural beauty, but “natural

³⁷ Walter Benjamin: “Central Park” in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard university Press, 2003, p173.

³⁸ Shierry Weber Nicholzen: *Exact Imagination*, 1997, pp 149 – 151.

beauty as such”. That is, art imitates the beauty that will be defined by its innate “undefinability”.³⁹ Accordingly, because this enigma can be experienced only through the distance granted by philosophical reflection – which for Adorno explains why art must be interpreted by philosophy⁴⁰ – the closeness fostered by mimetic union would leave the subject unable to cognise this aspect of the artwork. Consequently, although art objects are experienced mimetically out of necessity, Shierry Weber NicholSEN argues that this experience must be tempered by a cry of “self-liberation” that allows the perceiving subject to view the object as other and gain the vantage from which the enigmatic can be engaged.⁴¹ In other words, when beholding a work of art the subject is compelled to encounter the item as that which is distant regardless of physical proximity, an act that re-creates the spatial dimension of auratic sensation. The non-discursive, non-conceptual structure of Pollock’s practice suggests that it would engender this exact mode of reception. Therefore, to enable full reflection on the enigmatic quality of the artist’s work, the observer would need to be both assimilated to and detached from his paintings. As such, Pollock’s pictures emerge once more as auratic objects that appear irreducibly distant regardless of their proximity.

However, that works of art can be defined as inherently distant from empirical life does not divest such items of all connections to society. Indeed, Adorno avowed that there exists in all artworks a latent societal content. Initially, this assertion seems contradictory. If an artwork is thought to be autonomous, and by virtue of that distinction is interpreted as a object of great political significance – a significance that hinges upon notions of the work’s inherent resistance to dominant social relations – how can that same object be situated within the social sphere and still retain the qualities that engender its critical potential? Effectively, we must ask in what manner can painting, sculpture, or any other creative discipline be equated with factors that are alien to, and hence threaten to destabilise, their very autonomy.⁴²

Resolving this problem was crucial, as Adorno stressed that art would never be understood while its “social essence” remained opaque. Furthermore, no form of practice would escape this dilemma; even the work that professed full

³⁹ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p107.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p107.

⁴¹ Shierry Weber NicholSEN: *Exact Imagination*, 1997, pp 149 – 151.

⁴² Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p354.

withdrawal from the everyday would be affected.⁴³ Adorno's solution hinged on the postulation that art is a discourse composed of two distinct elements, and was thus in possession of a "twofold" essence. As he put it, although art must separate itself from the social relations of empirical reality, it also belongs to the empirical sphere, and to the social relations that constitute everyday life.⁴⁴

Central to this declaration is the idea that the dialectic of art resembles, but does not intentionally replicate, the social dialectic of everyday life. Such assertions further elucidate the issue of why art had no need to convey content gleaned from the external world. In Adorno's thesis, the conditions and tensions of reality appear in works of art as the "immanent problems of artistic form". This, and not the intentional introduction of objective motifs or content gleaned from the social sphere, was identified as the source of art's relation to the everyday.⁴⁵ Indeed, the philosopher reasoned that recognition of art's social dynamic hinged upon the realisation that acts of "social labour" were implicit in its creation. In other words, creative practice possessed a societal dimension precisely because the artist is, at any given point in history, a product of the existing cultural climate: a figure who is produced by society and who thus reproduces society in turn.⁴⁶

Consequently, the motifs at play in Adorno's thesis can be placed alongside Marx's reading of base and superstructure and viewed as a response to the contention that all forms of intellectual production are patterned upon the conditions generated by dominant economic systems. It is in this context that art can extract itself from society by refusing to engage explicit political content, and yet still remain linked to the social realm. As Osborne concludes, Adorno defined artistic labour as a historically ongoing dialectic of "expression and construction" in which the artist's work develops out of the "mediations" of wider social relations.⁴⁷ Against this background, the observation that Pollock's oeuvre could be considered social only in the sense that its author was a member of society becomes paramount. Far from being defamatory, this idea allows his art to be fully integrated into Adorno's philosophy. Although Pollock's

⁴³ Ibid, p479.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p358.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p8.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p422.

⁴⁷ Peter Osborne: "Modernism, Abstraction and the Return to Painting", 1991, p68.

abstraction denied the integration of content gleaned from empirical reality, the artist's own contact with that precise sphere endowed his work with a clear social dimension. Key to this position is the painter's belief that his work was indirectly motivated by forces manifest in daily life. This idea is given clarity through Pollock's avowal that, as a modern painter, he would be unable to evoke the epoch of aviation, atomic technology and radio communication by using skills gleaned from the past. As such, the techniques he developed might be interpreted as part of the artist's attempt to find a visual language capable of expressing a new age.⁴⁸

The question of how post-war culture would shape creative labour was of similar importance for Adorno. Significantly, his reflections would echo Pollock's focus upon rapid scientific development. As the philosopher argued, it is impossible today to walk through a forest without hearing the sound of an airplane overhead, an intrusion that denies art one of its primary subjects.⁴⁹ Nature can no longer supply the artist with the site of poetic contemplation because that site has been corrupted. Moreover, the industrial landscape cannot be considered an alternative space of celebration, because such urban sprawls would invite only "false poetic paeans". Consequently, if art is purged of the ability to reflect upon natural beauty – and is equally incapable of meditating upon the forces that foster nature's ruination – the only area for creative practice to engage will be that of the "non-representational". Adorno identified this crisis as central to the turn towards abstraction prevalent in many disciplines,⁵⁰ a claim akin to Pollock's belief that the age of technology compelled artists to forsake figuration and focus instead on the internal.⁵¹ Therefore, because his methodologies are revealed as receptive to the influence of cultural formations, Pollock's art achieved the dual feat of being aloof from, and yet part of, the "social complex" of modernity.

⁴⁸ Jackson Pollock: "Interview with William Wright", in *Art in Theory: 1900 – 2000*, 2003, p584.

⁴⁹ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p311.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp 311 – 312.

⁵¹ Jackson Pollock: "Interview with William Wright", 2003, p584.

IV: Crisis.

That the issue of autonomy acquired added significance in the wake of transformations that eroded the cultic character of the work of art is hardly surprising. As Jürgen Habermas observed, the possibility that art might appropriate content gleaned from daily life and be disseminated throughout the empirical sphere imbues the idea of creative practice existing as a thing-for-itself with increased critical purchase. Put simply, if art filters into the everyday in the manner anticipated by the ‘Artwork Essay’, then the economic and political forces operative within that realm will threaten to corrupt art itself. This realisation has important implications, which Habermas explained thus: following the destruction of the aura, the only artwork that will be able to resist assimilation into the consumer economy will be the “formalistic” piece that remains separated and removed from the masses.⁵²

But such arguments are marked by one unavoidable flaw. Autonomous art may offer a vital subversion of the commodity form,⁵³ but that resistance does not render such practices invulnerable to assimilation by the mechanisms of capitalism. In spite of his defence of autonomy Adorno was fully aware of this danger, and pinpointed a notable example of such degradation in relation to abstraction itself. As he laments, the enshrinement of abstract expressionism in the “pantheon of cultural exhibits” situated the discourse firmly within systems of commodity exchange, causing such works to negate their “radical” origins and become little more than an expensive wallpaper used by the affluent members of society to decorate their homes and businesses.⁵⁴

Pollock was not immune to this crisis, and his shift in status from radical artist to the figure who made pictures that satisfied the tastes of the wealthy can be confirmed by events which took place in 1951. In March of that year, Vogue magazine commissioned Cecil Beaton to create a series of images celebrating the latest fashions. The photographer chose Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythms* (1950) as his backdrop, and in one scene styled the folds of the model’s dress in a manner evocative of the swirling lines and sweeping diagonals of the composition. It has

⁵² Jürgen Habermas: “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism – The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin” in *New German Critique*, No 17, Spring, 1979, p43.

⁵³ Stewart Martin: “The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity”, 2007, p24.

⁵⁴ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p325.

been suggested that this case study offers evidence of Pollock's skill at manipulating the media in order to generate publicity for his art. Yet this judgement has also been reversed. For Pollock's detractors, Beaton's photo-shoot provided positive proof that the autonomy of modernist art rendered it a benign presence incapable of preserving its critical stance against capitalism.⁵⁵ For example, if a painting is deemed suitable for a supporting role in a fashion spread that – for all its elegance and finesse – is still tied to systems of commerce and exchange, how can that same painting be considered a work of critical potential?

Further issues emerge when one considers that recent scholarship has associated the art of Pollock and his contemporaries with a clandestine propaganda campaign waged during Cold War. To explore this idea demands focus upon a number of subjects, the first of which is the structure of artistic patronage in the epoch contemporary to the New York School. As Eva Cockcroft notes, because museums were often sustained by private funding, “prominent citizens” who controlled banks and corporations regularly held positions of authority on the boards of major galleries.⁵⁶ Equally important is an awareness of the social-political climate of the post-war era. However, I do not want to focus upon the military or diplomatic context of the standoff between communism and capitalism, but rather question the extent to which contrasting forms of creative practice provided a battle-ground for exchanges between east and west.

That the dissemination of overt political content became central to Soviet art from the late 1920s onwards has already been discussed, likewise the techniques used to achieve such effects. Yet what has not been considered is the fact that such works were distributed not only in their country of origin, but were also intended to reach a wider audience.

USSR in Construction is a case in point. The journal was published in German, English, French and Spanish, and in addition to boosting support for state policies from within Russia, the paper played a major role in foreign policies designed to increase the Soviet Union's allies across the globe. Significantly, Stalin realised that he would need aid from other nations to achieve the industrial development he desired, and was thus keen to foster good relations with

⁵⁵ T.J. Clark: *Farewell to an Idea*, 1999, pp 306 - 307.

⁵⁶ Eva Cockcroft: “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War” in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, edited by Francis Frascina, London, Routledge, 2000, pp 147 – 148.

countries that might provide machinery and technical knowledge. As such, disseminating an image of the USSR as a modern, forward thinking state was identified as one way of gathering the required support. However, this portrayal also served other ends. Conveying an image of strength and prosperity offered a vital weapon against enemy states that might otherwise perceive Russia to be weak, impoverished and unworthy of respect in the arena of global politics. In this context, creative labour was used to not only to convey images of a “workers’ paradise” immeasurably superior to capitalist decadence, but also to confirm that the paradise in question was ready to repel any incursion over its borders.⁵⁷

The need for an artistic response to counter the spread of support for the Soviet Union thus became a vital concern in the west. Yet because many were openly hostile to the idea of the politicised artwork, believing it to be redolent of Marxist social critique, this response could not attempt a parallel integration of political content into artistic forms. What was required, therefore, was a system that would not only convey the values needed to counteract the communist threat – namely notions of freedom and subjectivity, the qualities that defenders of bourgeois society wanted to assert as dominant in their own cultures and absent in Russia’s bureaucratised world of state oppression – but would present those ideals in a form that was itself synonymous with individuality.⁵⁸

Significantly, a suitable genre existed in form of Abstract Expressionism, a realisation that granted the practice a new level of acceptance. Such works had previously aroused suspicions from those alert to the existence of global communist conspiracies. Speaking in 1949, US Senator George Dondero distinguished modern art as an engine of revolution and identified Kandinsky as its agitator in chief. The painter’s prominent role in the “Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture” (INKhUK) combined with his allegiance to Trotsky cast Kandinsky as an instigator of communist art. Crucially, Dondero reasoned that Kandinsky’s influence upon the avant-gardes of Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism set the conditions for the integration of “red art” into American society, and with it the threat of radicalisation and uprising. There was, he

⁵⁷ Victor Margolin: *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy 1917-1946*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp 166 – 167.

⁵⁸ Jan de Hart Mathews: “Art and Politics in Cold War America” in *Pollock and After*, 2000, pp 155 – 156.

argued, a clear danger that if practice shaped by Kandinsky's theories on abstraction filtered into art schools, galleries and museums, it would simultaneously spread leftist ideology throughout the country. Hence all work that bore the trace of his presence, a category into which Pollock's oeuvre clearly fell, was to be treated with caution.⁵⁹

Yet because the art of Pollock and his followers centred upon notions of untamed individual creativity it also offered a potent metaphor for social liberty. As Cockcroft asserts, Abstract Expressionism engendered the assumption that painters were able to explore their inner most thoughts and feelings precisely because the governing forces of their homeland allowed them to do so. Unlike their Soviet counterparts, American artists were not encouraged to follow state sanctioned agendas that outlined what was permissible in creative labour in terms of both form and content. Thus their work suggested that the west was a free society unfettered by the regimented restrictions of the communist state.⁶⁰

Initial attempts to convey this message through touring exhibitions failed due to excessive censorship designed to expel pictures deemed politically suspect. However, Cockcroft contends that such failures were reversed by the intervention of major galleries who organized national and international shows of works reflective of the notions of cultural freedom the west sought to promote. In this context, the fact that institutions backed by prominent industrialists supported events such as *The New American Painting* – a famous celebration of Abstract Expressionism – becomes a key point of concern. The parties who reaped the greatest rewards from capitalist economy would wish to counter the forces that threatened consumer society. Accordingly, Cockcroft argues that if creative practice was identified as one way of pre-empting this crisis, it follows that the wealthy would use their influence to ensure that objects deemed crucial to the fight against communism were brought to the forefront of public consciousness.⁶¹

However, integrating such pictures into systems of political discourse served to erode the autonomy that was once their defining trait. Like Constructivism, the New York School would no longer be accountable to its own intellectual system

⁵⁹ George Dondero: "From *The Congressional Record*" in *Art in Theory: 1900 – 2000*, 2003, pp 667 – 668.

⁶⁰ Eva Cockcroft: "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War", 2000, pp 149 – 151.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp 152 – 153.

but would be answerable to “utilitarian imperatives” that destroy self-referentiality by forcing works to serve ideological ends.⁶² Clearly, this threatened to corrupt the qualities that granted such practices their radicalism. Abstract Expressionism would be unable to critique existing social relations through its inherent opposition to society because it had become an agent of those relations. In this context, Pollock’s oeuvre would be subject to the “aging of the new”; to the implosion of artistic forms enacted not by time but by their incorporation into the neutralising discourse of the culture industry.⁶³ The problems intrinsic to this situation are heightened when one considers that fact that a mode of practice imbued with the potential to, as Adorno put it, critique the “total-exchange society” that seeks to turn everything into a “for-other”, was used to defend that very culture.

Such declarations suggest not only an extension of modernism’s “bad dream” – a perpetuation of the nightmare scenario in which art was used to preserve rather than critique the economic conditions of empirical life⁶⁴ – but also that the problems Adorno located in the non-auratic work, namely its vulnerability to appropriation by ideological systems, were equally pertinent to its auratic other. The phenomenal distance from the everyday created by the sensory immersion of auratic experience offered no safeguard to corruption by committed rhetoric.

V: Concepts.

If an association with Cold War politics began the erosion of abstraction’s integrity then the derision would be completed by the open scorn of the post-Pollock generation. Integral to their rejection of formalist ideology was a dismissal of the received notion that painting and sculpture were synonymous with the discourse of aesthetics, and hence with notions of taste and beauty.⁶⁵ The dissenters reasoned that artworks possessed no pre-determined link with these qualities, and argued instead that the perpetuation of such ideas had forced creative labour into a corner from where it was compelled to satisfy such criteria.

⁶² Christina Kiaer: *Imagine No Possessions*, 2005, p210.

⁶³ Peter Osborne: “Modernism, Abstraction and the Return to Painting”, 1991, p69.

⁶⁴ T.J. Clark: *Farewell to an Idea*, 1999, pp 306 - 307.

⁶⁵ Frances Colpitt: “The Formalist Connection and Originary Myths of Conceptual Art” in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice*, edited by Michael Corris, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p28.

The “visual *Muzak*” offered by Pollock, Marko Rothko and Willem de Kooning was thus identified as merely the next link in the chain of art’s debasement. As Joseph Kosuth scathingly remarked, work of this type was “not art at all” but a pure “exercise in aesthetics”. To be sure, he avowed that “formalist painting” attained artistic status only through strict adherence to its “art idea”.

Compositions would be deemed works of art only if they were conceived as a rectangular canvas that would be coloured with certain hues and pigments in order to evoke certain shapes and engender certain modes of reception. For Kosuth, the obvious conclusion suggested by this methodology was that it allowed art to be made with minimal creative effort. In this restrictive approach to production there was seemingly no space for real innovation.⁶⁶

Redressing the negativity that had become endemic in artistic labour thus required artists to question the nature of art itself. But if an individual were simply exploring the properties specific to a given medium, as was the case with the self-referential project championed by Greenberg, they would never achieve this goal, for to work solely within a single discipline was to be bound by the traditions that surrounded it. As Kosuth put it, the word “art” is a general term, whereas words such as painting are “specific”. Hence the subject who questions the nature of painting alone will be unable to question the nature of art because, to quote Kosuth, painting denotes a “*kind of art*” and not a totality of artistic practices.⁶⁷ Consequently, artists sought to distance themselves not only from the techniques that achieved dominance in the age of Abstract Expressionism, but also from the materials through which the genre achieved its success. The final passage in a manifesto published to accompany a demonstration performed at the 1967 *Salon de la Jeune Peinture* – an event in which four artists, Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni, each selected a simple geometric motif and then, working in public view from 11: am until 8: pm, produced a series of paintings identical to their chosen design – encapsulates this opposition to artistic convention. Significantly, the participating artists claimed that as painting was used to reveal the aesthetic qualities of, amongst other things, flowers, the female form, erotica, everyday life, art, the Dadaist

⁶⁶ Joseph Kosuth: “Art After Philosophy” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alex Alberro and Blake Stimpson, London, MIT Press, 1999, pp 162 – 163.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p163.

movement, psychoanalysis and the conflict in Vietnam, they were compelled to renounce any connection to the medium.⁶⁸

There is, of course, an obvious flaw in this assertion. For all their hostility to painting, Buren and his colleagues were still staging their attack from the confines of painterly practice. As such, one might reason that they were still questioning the nature of painting. Yet to discount their work on such grounds would be naïve, for their project anticipates revisions that hold radical implications for the evolution of the artwork. Inherent to their dismissal of established media was a refusal of the classical models of auratic creativity associated with Pollock. Indeed, their practice would continue the destruction of painterly expression initiated by Gerhard Richter's *Colour Chart* series of 1966.

These were large rectangular compositions on which the artist painted uniform blocks of pure colour, creating an effect redolent of the sample sheets prepared by commercial paint suppliers. Such pieces have been received as parodies of the gestural traditions that govern the use of colour within abstract art, and hence as a form of anti-painting that emphasises the mere "chromatic relationships" between pigments rather than exploring colour as an emotional language.⁶⁹ Accordingly, the *Colour Charts* critiqued the expressive poetics inherent to many forms of abstraction by presenting paint not as a conduit for the soul but as a lifeless industrial product. As Thomas Crow put it, although the sheer scale of these works invites comparisons to canvases by Newman and Stella, their incorporation of motifs connected to mass manufacture also suggests a satire in which abstract, expressive painting is re-located within a Warholian methodology of machine-like, de-personalised production.⁷⁰

Buren and his colleagues staged a similar revision. For example, when he composed a stream of indistinguishable canvases, each comprising twenty-nine equally sized red and white stripes, the automated mode of labour purged Buren's work of every imaginable human emotion. Pain and fear, happiness and love, were absent from his images. The myth that art is a way of visualising internal emotions, of communicating the non-communicable, was deflated.

⁶⁸ Michel Claura: "Paris Commentary", *ibid*, p84.

⁶⁹ Benjamin Buchloh: "Readymade, Photography and Painting in the Painting of Gerhard Richter", in Benjamin Buchloh: *Neo Avant Garde and Culture Industry*, 2000, p395.

⁷⁰ Thomas Crow: *The Rise of the Sixties, American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955 – 69*, London, Orion Publishing Group, 1996, p98.

Sensitivity and insight were defeated, and the artist was rendered an “insignificant” component in the production process.⁷¹

Consequently, it is possible to identify a situation whereby an emotional practice centred upon the pursuit of self-expression was succeeded by a mode of labour that announced the disintegration and re-construction of art itself. Increasingly, this process came to rest upon the emancipation of the idea from the confines of the object, a methodology that can be elucidated by the American artist Sol LeWitt.

For LeWitt, Conceptual Art was a movement that presented the Idea as the central factor in a work’s production. Accordingly, all decision-making would be made in advance, thus rendering the execution of the project a purely “perfunctory affair”. As Lewitt put it: “Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist’s mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly”.⁷² Moreover, because conceptual artists were concerned solely with the process of “conception and realization” – because an object state was needed only to allow the work to be perceived – it would not matter what form the finished work might take.⁷³ Taken to the extreme, this logic suggests that ideas need not be realised in physical form, a possibility that became a central concern for Kosuth.

In *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1921), Ludwig Wittgenstein avowed that all propositions share a particular form, which is: “such and such is the case”.⁷⁴ Yet Wittgenstein also reasoned that certain propositions would form tautologies because that which they proposed would be “unconditionally true”.⁷⁵ Accordingly, Kosuth claimed that when an artist makes a work of art their activities form a tautological proposition precisely because the act of creating art merely proposes that a given artwork is a work of art. Crucially, this observation suggests that the production of objects is “conceptually irrelevant to the condition of art”,⁷⁶ which thus implies that art does not need material shape, but

⁷¹ Michel Claura: “Paris Commentary”, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1999, pp 82 – 87.

⁷² Sol LeWitt: “Sentences on Conceptual Art”, *ibid*, pp 106 – 108.

⁷³ Sol LeWitt: “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, *ibid*, p14.

⁷⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, London, Routledge, (4.5) 1999, p103.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, (4.461), pp 97 – 99.

⁷⁶ Joseph Kosuth: “Art After Philosophy”, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1999, p172.

can exist numerically, as language, or in media previously understood to be beyond the realm of creative labour.⁷⁷

Lawrence Weiner's *Statements* – a series of written instructions describing activities that could be executed in external environments, such as a can of spray paint emptied out onto a floor space⁷⁸ – offer one indication of how art accommodated this intellectual framework. For Weiner, each *Statement* could be realised in one of three ways: the artist could make it, it could be made by the figure who read the statement in an exhibition, or it could remain unrealised and hence exist as an idea given form through language. In making this claim, he highlighted the fact that because each mode of execution was equal to the artist's intentions there was no way in which one method of realisation could take precedent over the others. As such, the decision concerning what form the work would take – be it object, copy or concept – was left to the individual who received the original text.⁷⁹

For some critics, this process of dematerialisation was driven by a political agenda. The denouncement of art's materiality was considered a reaction against the artwork's growing status as a valuable commodity brought and sold by private collectors. Moreover, a sense of unease concerning allegations of art's use by systems of Cold War propaganda began to emerge. As such, it was argued that art had to extricate itself from the system whereby forces external to the artist were able to take possession of their craft and use it to promote their own ends. In this sense, it becomes possible to view the ideologies of conceptualism against the wider cultural and social tensions of the late 1960s, which culminated in the student uprisings and national strikes of May 1968. To paraphrase Kristin Ross, international opposition to the Vietnam War acted as a major catalyst to insurrections in France, Germany, Japan, Italy and the United States.⁸⁰ Similar concerns shaped the development of Conceptual Art. As Lucy Lippard observed, there was urgent need for a practice that could not be "brought and sold" by the society that claimed ownership of "everything that was exploiting the world and promoting the Vietnam War". The establishment of art as idea offered a solution

⁷⁷ Sol Lewitt: "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", *ibid*, pp 12 – 16.

⁷⁸ Lawrence Weiner: "Statements" in *Six Years*, edited by Lucy Lippard, 1997, p37.

⁷⁹ Lawrence Weiner: "Declaration of Intent", quoted by Thomas Crow in *The Rise of the Sixties*, 1996, pp 156 – 157.

⁸⁰ Kristin Ross: *May '68 And Its Afterlives*, London, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p10.

to this problem. Because ideas were unmarketable they could not be readily integrated into an exchange economy, hence the artist could seemingly avoid the crisis that caused Pollock to be maligned.⁸¹ Therefore, the goals of Conceptual art might be compared to Constructivism's search for the "Socialist Object". Like the first generation of Russian avant-gardists, the artists that came to prominence in the wake of Abstract Expressionism sought to create work that would not only dismantle the citadels of bourgeois art, but would negate the dreams and desires fostered by capitalism and the commodity fetish.⁸²

But the key issue engendered by dematerialisation in the context of this chapter is undoubtedly the notion that the process held crucial implications for the aura of the artwork. Such ideas can be introduced via an interview conducted between Buchloh and Warhol. Following a discussion concerning the malleable boundaries between Conceptual Art and Pop, Buchloh reasoned that common to both was a Duchampian critique of the belief that the artist was an author, an innovator, or a figure who fashioned precious items.⁸³ Such assessments suggest that by denying the significance of authorship and craftsmanship, Conceptualism challenged the artwork's status as a unique item born of individual creative insight and hence divested it of qualities that engender an immersive, auratic response. Furthermore, because Conceptual Art fostered a transformation in the material state of creative practice, from traditional painterly or sculptural forms to art-as-idea, the movement would disrupt the reverie of genuine aura by denying the beholder access to an object of contemplation in the traditional sense.

VI: Index.

These claims can be can be expounded through Lewitt's assertion that conceptual artists sought to challenge the viewer on a mental level,⁸⁴ a process

⁸¹ Frances Colpitt: "The Formalist Connection and Originary Myths of Conceptual Art", 2004, p40. The Lippard quote cited by Colpitt is originally from "Escape Attempts" in Goldstein and Rorimer: *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965 – 1975*, Los Angeles, MOCA, 1995, p28.

⁸² Christina Kiaer: *Imagine No Possessions*, 2005, pp 2 – 4.

⁸³ Benjamin Buchloh and Andy Warhol: "An Interview with Andy Warhol", in *Andy Warhol, October Files 2*, edited by Annette Michelson, London, MIT Press, 2001, pp 126 – 127.

⁸⁴ Sol Lewitt: "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1999, p14.

that would find its exemplar in the work of the British Art & Language group. An editorial in the first issue of *Art-Language*, the collective's self-published journal, illustrates the critical background to their practice. The text opened with the following challenge: what would happen if an editorial statement written in order to answer the question "what is conceptual art" was itself classified not as a piece of writing, but as a conceptual art work? That is, if creative practice has attained a point of development whereby written language is employed as a representational tool, then does the ensuing intellectual framework provide a context in which an essay can be viewed as an artwork? Key to such questions was a blurring of the boundaries that separated artist and theoretician. As Art & Language explain, the artist has been historically personified as a figure who creates works that subsequently require a series of elucidating "support languages". In Conceptual Art, however, art itself has begun to assimilate those discourses – for example, Kosuth's assimilation of Wittgenstein and analytical philosophy – suggesting that the making of art and the writing of theory have become synonymous. Advancing this connection thus invites the issue of what might happen if an essay were exhibited as an artwork. Would the surrounding environment compel the viewer to behold the sheets of paper as a visual art object, or would they simply read them as a "notice"? Equally pertinent is the question of ontology. Would the essay be denied artistic status because it lacks the visual characteristics historically required of an artwork, or is it possible for art to exist as both "theoretical" and "concrete" forms?⁸⁵

To some extent, the implications posed by this hypothesis were explored by the *Index 01* project of 1972. The piece comprised two main elements. Firstly, eighty-seven texts that had either been published in *Art-Language* or written by members of the expanded Art & Language collective were arranged and exhibited in a series of eight filing cabinets. Secondly, an enlarged typescript that listed every text included in the work was displayed on the surrounding walls. On this typescript, each piece of writing was assigned a number, and a key was used to signal its compatibility with the other essays in the installation. A + sign was used to denote an ideological or philosophical connection, a – sign was used to express incompatibility, and a letter T was used in instances where two texts

⁸⁵ Art & Language: "Editors of *Art-Language*, Introduction", *ibid*, pp 98 – 104.

were so different in content that to attempt any comparison would be unfeasible.⁸⁶

Although shorn of painterly elements the structure employed by the project enables its classification as a picture in the Wittgensteinian sense of the term. For Wittgenstein, propositions were pictures of reality. Key to this claim is the philosopher's assertion that the world exists as a "totality of facts". That is, reality is determined by the existence or non-existence of "atomic facts": the possibility or impossibility of occurrences between objects, entities and things.⁸⁷ Once this is understood it can be argued that to say *such and such is the case* depicts reality because it describes a fact and thus pictures the "logical features of reality". Consequently, propositions can be compared to hieroglyphics inasmuch as they create a "symbolic relationship" between language and the real world.⁸⁸ By proposing a series of positive or negative associations between a set of theses, the *Index* achieved just such a representation. To paraphrase the *Tractatus*, the act of declaring the connections and non-connections manifest in a critical discourse conveyed unto the beholder a "picture of facts",⁸⁹ a "state of affairs" that may exist in "logical space".⁹⁰

Clearly, the project that offered such a picture would demand a non-traditional mode of engagement, a process that *Index 01* supplied. Rather than contemplate the work as an aesthetic object, the subject was invited to follow the wall-mounted key, read the materials contained within the installation, then decipher the relations and oppositions suggested between them. As such, Charles Harrison has commented that the work represents an attempt to map an ongoing conversation detailing the "condition of art", and also to encourage the individual to participate in that dialogue. Hence rather than operate as an object that awaits the beholder's gaze, the *Index* becomes an artwork that is mobilized through mental activity.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Charles Harrison: "Conceptual Art, The Aesthetic and The End(s) of Art" in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, edited by Gill Perry and Paul Wood, London, Open University Press, 2004, pp 52 - 53.

⁸⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, (1 – 2.01), 1999, p31.

⁸⁸ Ibid, (4.011 – 4.023), pp 65 - 67.

⁸⁹ Ibid, (2.1 – 2.14), p39.

⁹⁰ Ibid, (2.201 – 2.202), pp 41 – 43.

⁹¹ Charles Harrison: "Conceptual Art, The Aesthetic and The End(s) of Art", 2004, pp 52 - 53.

Accordingly, what becomes crucial in the context of the auratic is the fact that *Index 01* would foster a mode of reception that represents the antithesis of lingering meditation. Writing about Hans Hacke, Benjamin Buchloh argued that Hacke's practice had transformed the bourgeois mode of aesthetic experience – which centred upon passive contemplation – into a mode of reception focused upon interaction, participation and collaboration.⁹² The same can be said of *Art & Language*. Unlike the examples presented above, the *Index* would not exist as an object of pure beauty because it was intended to convey and perpetuate an intellectual dialogue.

The work's appropriation of such heteronomous content might be traced to the crisis in artistic autonomy initiated by abstraction's integration into the spheres of fashion, consumerism and Cold War propaganda. As Jeff Wall asserts, autonomous art had reached a point whereby it could only be created through a rigorous simulation of the "non-autonomous".⁹³ Individuals seeking to question the nature of artistic production in the manner proposed by Kosuth – an activity that implies an autonomous practice inasmuch as it calls for artists to critique the ontological condition of art through creative labour – thus had to attempt their enquiry by aligning their work with themes gleaned from areas beyond the aesthetic. Hence granting their practice a utility divorced from the internal laws governing art itself. For Wall, *Art & Language* achieved this through their entwining of art and "critical commentary". This act allowed their practice to question the boundaries of what art might be, how it might exist, and how it might operate. But because this interrogation was staged through projects centred upon the non-art categories of discourse and philosophical debate, such questions were posed in a manner that did not focus on the artwork's formal properties of form, colour, line and shape. Similarly, their works would not profess separation from discernable use values precisely because they were intended to archive arguments about artistic production and provoke further discussions within that field. As such, we might argue that *Art & Language* anticipated Osborne's

⁹² Benjamin Buchloh: "Hans Hacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason" in Benjamin Buchloh: *Neo Avant-Garde and Culture Industry*, 2000, p214.

⁹³ Jeff Wall: "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" in Jeff Wall: *Selected Essays and Interviews*, New York, Museum of Modern Art and London, Thames and Hudson, 2007, p150.

reading of Adornian autonomy and made autonomous art by uniting their work with anti-art elements.⁹⁴

That *Index 01* encapsulates this methodology confirms that to approach it through the state of disinterestedness demanded by the purely beautiful would be inappropriate. If the subject were to explore the intellectual territory mapped out before them, they would have to adopt a position of critical interest in relation to the essays relayed by the project. Therefore, by inviting cognitive exploration rather than reflective reverie, *Index 01* refused the perceptual immersion fostered by Pollock's art and disavowed the sensations of phenomenal distance engendered by objects that trigger such experiences. Moreover, if we accept that the heteronomous factors responsible for this transformed act of beholding were introduced in response to an exchange economy that rendered traditional notions of autonomous art problematic, it becomes possible to locate a further example of how art's ability to foster auratic sensation is subject to the influence of economic relations.

Additionally, because the *Index* refutes modes of engagement traditionally employed in response to the aesthetic it can be reasoned that the observer would have no need to experience it mimetically. The spectator would not have to follow Adorno's example and interpret the work through reflection, assimilation and eventual re-enactment, because the installation was intended to elicit an indefinite conceptual analysis. As such, the corporeal projection experienced by the beholder of Pollock's art would be suspended, and with it the onlooker's ability to perceive their emotional self coalesce with the object. The observer would not encounter the externalization of their thoughts and feelings amid the clerical suite of filling cabinets, and the reams of text within would not return the beholder's gaze. Hence *Index 01* would disavow an exchange essential to the perpetuation of genuine aura and be rendered non-auratic by the particular response it demanded from its audience. Such would be the outcome of exhibiting textual material in the gallery space.

⁹⁴ Peter Osborne: "Art After Photography After Conceptual Art" in *Radical Philosophy* 150 (July/August 2008), p49.

VII: Gas Stations.

But if Conceptual Art's contribution to the aura debate is to be fully engaged then the role photography played in its ideologies must also be explored. This is not an arbitrary claim, for if the movement found its "primary material" in language then the photograph represented its "second form". The relationship can be introduced thus. Because conceptualism placed emphasis on ideas rather than materials it frequently took art into the realm of performance. Gilbert and George's *Singing Sculpture* of 1970 is a good example of this. Intended as a "living sculpture", the piece featured the two artists miming the song *Underneath the Arches* whilst dressed in matching suits and identical bronze face paint. But what truly distinguishes this, and other projects of its type, is the work's transience. It exists only in the moment of execution and needs to be fixed in time to endure beyond its ephemeral life span. Crucially, the archival potential of photography provided a means with which this could be achieved.⁹⁵

Such readings imply that photography's relationship to Conceptual Art might be contextualised against the exchange between the *parergon* and the *ergon*. Kant offers an initial definition of these concepts by comparing *paregea* to ornaments, or more specifically to items that are not internal elements of an object or artwork, but are external additions to such things.⁹⁶ However, Derrida provides greater illumination by revealing the *parergon* to be something that is "against, beside and in addition to the *ergon*", which is the work, the item, the project. As he argues, the *parergon* attaches something that is an extra component or exterior to the actual thing. Consequently, it is not an intrinsic property of the work, but a "supplement" of the artefact, a quality that completes it. The *parergon* intervenes with the *ergon* only to the extent that the object is both lacking in "something" and lacking "from itself".⁹⁷

Therefore, because photographic documentation does not represent an internal part of works by figures such as Gilbert and George – yet corrects a lack inherent to their art by fixing for posterity that which would be otherwise lost – the process might be considered a *parergon* to the *ergon* of conceptual practice. In a

⁹⁵ Steve Edwards: "Photography Out Of Conceptual Art", in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, 2004, p137.

⁹⁶ Immanuel Kant: *Analytic of the Beautiful*, 1963, p12.

⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida: *The Truth in Painting*, 1987 pp 54 – 60.

climate where creative labour encompassed the pattern outlined by Wiener's *Statements*, the photograph provided a form of visual evidence able to indicate that a particular activity had been performed.

However, to assert that photography's relationship to Conceptual Art was limited to that of a supporting player would be naive. On the contrary, the non-art, anti-auratic character of the photographic image made a vital contribution to the movement's ideology. Importantly, the utilitarian nature of the camera rendered the apparatus an ideal ally for artists seeking to renounce the factors traditionally associated with the auratic object. Creative insight and uniqueness are qualities absent from the image produced by the automated workings of a mechanical device.⁹⁸ Therefore, photography offered a visual language that could evade integration into the traditions and histories that surrounded painting and sculpture.⁹⁹

Accordingly, even though they displayed little familiarity with debates addressing the medium's creative merit, artists from Ed Ruscha onwards approached photography in a manner that recalled Benjamin, Heartfield and the Russian avant-garde insofar as they perceived it to be an overtly "non-art" form.¹⁰⁰ That is, they used the camera as an anonymous mode of production able to remove any "overt authorial comment" from their work.¹⁰¹ Perhaps such perceptions are indebted to the connection between photography and radical politics that developed in the 1930s, an exchange that hinges upon the assumption that photographers are able to record reality without "subjective expression".¹⁰² Ruscha's photographic books of the early sixties certainly conform to such notions of emotional neutrality. For example, in *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963) – a work in which the artist documents a series of such sites on stretch of the famous Route 66 highway from Los Angeles to Oklahoma

⁹⁸ Jeff Wall: "Marks of Indifference", 2008, pp 158 – 159.

⁹⁹ Anne Rorimer: *New Art of the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2004, pp 114 – 115.

¹⁰⁰ Jaleh Mansoor: "Ed Ruscha's One Way Street" in *October*, no 111, Winter, 2005, pp 134 – 135.

¹⁰¹ Anne Rorimer: *New Art of the 60s and 70s*, 2004, pp 114 – 115.

¹⁰² Blake Stimson: *The Pivot of the World: Photography and its Nation*, London, MIT Press, 2006, pp 19 – 21.

City¹⁰³ – the eponymous structures are recorded with a technique that has been variously described as depersonalised, unaesthetic, deadpan.¹⁰⁴

This methodology is aptly suited to the motifs engaged by the work in question. Clear equivalence exists between the bland, amateurish style of Ruscha's images and the faceless ubiquity of his subjects. His books explored the banal and vernacular structures that Margaret Iversen would call "anti-landmarks". They evoked the vistas Jack Kerouac described in *On The Road* (1955) and visualised a world of prefabricated houses and drive-in movie theatres, the "ragged promised land" that existed on the outer edges of America.¹⁰⁵ Hence we might assert that Ruscha sought to capture an unremarkable landscape in any equally vapid image.

As Melanie Mariño has suggested, this interplay between impassive photography and non-descript locations created an act of social critique. In her analysis, what Ruscha emphasised was not the "singularity" of each location, but their "homogeneity". As if to highlight the standardization or eternal return of the same, to use Benjamin's terminology, engendered by capitalism.¹⁰⁶ But the artist's commitment to photography's anti-aesthetic potential went beyond this apparent synergy between the object and execution of his work. As Ruscha himself declared: photography has no place in the world of fine art, it can only function as a provider of technical information for the commercial sector.¹⁰⁷ In other words, Baudelaire's avowal that the camera should limit itself to the archiving of visual fact was embraced as a credo for creative practice.

Such commitments betray the influence of Marcel Duchamp. Like his predecessor, Ruscha wanted to incorporate mass-produced, readymade objects into the field of creative practice. It would be his embrace of photography's mechanical character that allowed this to be realised.¹⁰⁸ As Crow put it, the denial of any creative, aesthetic presentation that characterised Ruscha's books –

¹⁰³ Melanie Mariño: "Almost Not Photography" in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice*, 2004, p67.

¹⁰⁴ Margaret Iversen: "Following Pieces", in *Photography Theory*, edited by James Elkins, London, Routledge, 2007, p95.

¹⁰⁵ Jack Kerouac: *On The Road*, St Ives, Penguin Books, 1972, p80. (For a comparison of Kerouac and Ruscha see Jaleh Mansoor: "Ed Ruscha's One-Way Street" in *October, 111, Winter*, 2005, pp 127 – 142.)

¹⁰⁶ Melanie Mariño: "Almost Not Photography", 2004, p71.

¹⁰⁷ Ed Ruscha: "Interview With John Caplans" in *Photography and Art*, edited by David Company, London, Thames and Hudson, 2003, p223.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p223.

likewise the fact that they were printed in large numbers in a fashion redolent of the factory production line – made them a perfect embodiment of Duchampian strategies.¹⁰⁹ In this context, the radicalism inherent to works like the gas station piece is rendered apparent. A project that fostered non-auratic items bereft of subjectivity, imagination and human skill would simultaneously yield objects purged of “the genius theory”; the quality Lippard identified as that which the ruling classes prized most in works of art.¹¹⁰ Ruscha achieved this exact feat. Consequently, he issued a vitriolic challenge to the New York School and their wealthy patrons, thereby setting a standard for critical practice to follow.

Moreover, it is possible to expand arguments focused upon the non-art character of photography and discern a supplementary example of the medium’s significance to Conceptual Art. At stake here is the contention that the camera became a key protagonist in the emergent drive to usurp the growing commodification of the artwork itself. Ian Burn sketched the extent of this growing dilemma, lamenting that artworks do not only become commodities, but are also cast as commodities from the moment of their inception.¹¹¹ Yet as Wall declares, because the booming market for painting had no photographic equivalent it was argued that the medium held the potential to negate the “commercial-bureaucratic-discursive order” responsible for transforming artworks into exchange values.¹¹²

Again, such readings acknowledge that the critical power conceptual artists located in the photograph was indivisible from their perceptions of its utilitarian, anti-auratic status. If photography were perceived to be a sub or non-art practice it would not elicit the same enthusiasm from patrons who sought the prestige of owning a work of “creative insight”. The status of having a Pollock or van Gogh amid your private possessions would not encompass those images that were associated with the lowly labour of the technician. Ensuing decades have, of course, rendered such claims problematic. Today, photographs hang in galleries and fetch prices comparable to paintings. Yet in the years contemporary to Ruscha this situation was yet to evolve. The possibility that photography might

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Crow: *The Rise of the Sixties*, 1996, p84.

¹¹⁰ Lucy Lippard: “Escape Attempts” in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, Berkeley and London, University of California Press, edited by Lucy Lippard, 1997, pxiv.

¹¹¹ Ian Burn: “The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, 1999, p320.

¹¹² Jeff Wall: “Marks of Indifference”, 2008, p149.

negate a culture that viewed artworks as little more than sources of exchange value thus rendered the medium key to the strategies of the Neo-Avant-Garde. Therefore, although ensuing years would reveal the precarious nature of such idealistic claims, in the late sixties it still seemed improbable that buyers would pay large sums for a set of images recording a transient event.¹¹³

VIII: Smithson.

In what follows I want to explore the interplay between photography and Conceptual Art in greater detail. As such, I intend to address a body of work in which I locate a defining example of the camera's ability to facilitate methodologies radically opposed to High Modernism, namely the art of Robert Smithson.

Although not immediately concerned with language, Smithson shared conceptualism's critique of the artwork's object state.¹¹⁴ However, he engaged this project by attempting creative practice through media previously absent from the artistic canon rather than through strict acts of dematerialisation. The "earthwork" offers an exemplar of this approach. Essentially, it was radical sculptural form created by working directly with the earth's geographic and geological features. Much of Smithson's oeuvre can be viewed in such terms, with arguably his most celebrated piece emerging in 1970 at the site of the *Great Salt Lake* in Utah.

The decision to work in this environment was inspired by its unique characteristics. In particular, Smithson was drawn to the "wine red" hue of water; a colouration formed by the micro bacteria that lived in the lake and gave its vast liquid expanse the appearance of tomato soup. Equally enticing was the phenomenon known as "icebergs". Liquids of high saline content seldom freeze, but the lake was also fed with fresh water by streams that drained into its depths. In calm conditions this water would not mix with the lake, but would float benignly on its surface. And when such conditions persisted into winter the falling temperatures would cause this aquatic skin to solidify and form thick ice

¹¹³ Lucy Lippard: "Post Face" in *Six Years*, edited by Lucy Lippard, 1997, p263.

¹¹⁴ Blake Stimson: "Conceptual Work and Conceptual Waste" in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice*, 2004, p285.

sheets across which coyotes would run. For Smithson, the possibility of staging a project in this surreal landscape was simply too much to resist.¹¹⁵

Following initial explorations, a place roughly one hour north of Rozel Point – a post-industrial area littered with the remnants of attempts to extract oil from a nearby tar pool, an activity rendered near futile by the corrosive, salt rich atmosphere that swiftly turned useful machinery into rust – was chosen as the location for the project. It was a site rich in geological features, and it would be in response to these details that the resulting earthwork was conceived.

Misshapen limestone beds and vast quantities of black basalt formed the topography of the area. The waters of the salt lake lapped against this fractured landscape, and from the shoreline one could see the cracked mesh of mudflats that lay beneath its pink-tinted depths. As Smithson looked on this site its terrain suggested an “immobile cyclone” in which the whole landscape appeared to shudder. It was, he argued, as if a long dormant earthquake had suddenly unleashed its energy and spread out from its point of origin, pulling everything into “a spinning sensation”, but one shorn of any trace of motion. As the artist concluded, the space was like a curling tempest that had become a prisoner of its vast rotating geography, and from that impression emerged the idea of the Spiral Jetty.¹¹⁶

The twisting, serpentine form of the salt lake monument was inspired by a space that evoked a swirling vortex into which solid and liquid collapsed.¹¹⁷ In this sense, all aspects of the project stemmed from an attempt to inscribe this idea onto the landscape. The work’s characteristic shape was initially marked out using lengths of string secured to a series of stakes, and then contractors working with dump trucks, tractors and mechanical diggers were enlisted to construct the jetty from earth and basalt gathered from the shoreline. Once completed, Smithson’s spiral measured fifteen hundred feet in length, was approximately fifteen feet wide and – as Ginfranco Gorgoni’s photographs attest – was capable of supporting the weight a fully-grown man.

That the work was documented was significant. A project that was vulnerable to the ravages of erosion and was staged in an isolated location needed to be

¹¹⁵ Robert Smithson: “The Spiral Jetty” in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, 1996, pp 143 – 145/p153.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p146.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p146.

recorded in a manner that allowed its original state to be preserved. But the significance photography occupied in his work is not limited to this simplistic observation. The camera was also essential to Smithson's dialectics of "site" and "non-site".

In Smithson's terminology the "site" was the location of the project, the physical environment in which it was situated, whereas the "non-site" was the work, the creative intervention in the land that was made out of the land itself.¹¹⁸ As Smithson elucidates, the "non-site" was created out of the site because ground from the "site" was incorporated into the art, rather than the art being merely added to the landscape.¹¹⁹ Applying this logic to the Salt lake project thus casts Rozen Point as the "site" and the *Spiral Jetty* as its corresponding "non-site".

Yet the "non-site" was also viewed as something that could be communicated to spaces beyond its original locale, thereby initiating a critical exchange between the vast expanses of nature and the enclosed "room space" of the gallery. The artist first addressed this idea in 1967, speculating that technology could be used to relay projects staged in remote places – like the New Jersey Pine Barrens or the frozen arctic wilderness – to a wider audience.¹²⁰ The resultant methodology was clarified in an essay titled "Aerial Art" (1969). Originally written as a proposal submitted to the Dallas-Fort Worth regional airport, the text outlines Smithson's plan for a series of earthworks or "non-sites" to be staged on the perimeters of the complex. Due to their location on the airport's outer fringes, these pieces would be visible only from the air. Therefore, the artist envisaged a parallel installation that would take the form of a gallery exhibition. This display would feature images, diagrams and maps detailing the position and construction of the *Aerial Sites*, and would have the effect of expanding the central zones of the terminal to the outer reaches of the airfield.¹²¹ Hence Smithson's practice evolved beyond the production of artefacts to become a discourse that contrasted outdoor sites that do not host objects with interior spaces where objects may be found.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Thomas Crow: *The Rise of the Sixties*, 1996, p172.

¹¹⁹ Robert Smithson: "The Spiral Jetty", 1996, p153.

¹²⁰ Robert Smithson: "Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler And Robert Smithson" in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, 1996, pp 211-212.

¹²¹ Robert Smithson: "Aerial Art", *ibid*, pp 116 – 117.

¹²² Robert Smithson: "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson", *ibid*, p244.

Crucially, it is possible to view this relationship as key to the artist's critique of the gallery system, and hence as a continuation of conceptualism's wider resistance to the influence of collectors and private finance. Smithson was deeply hostile to the museum and the process of exchange it initiated. He identified the institution as a key component of the process that alienates the artist from their own labour in a manner analogous to the economy that separates the worker from the products of their toil. As Smithson observed, the artist works in isolation, making an endless stream of objects, and then watches as other individuals confer value upon the results of their craft.¹²³

Such claims elucidate why Smithson viewed traditional notions of the art object as problematic. In his analysis, the critic who focuses upon the material product of the artist's labour ignores the cognitive processes that create the work in question, and instead infers on the artefact a commodity value that can be perpetuated only by "systems independent of the artist".¹²⁴ Furthermore, as if to reiterate the problematic legacy established by Pollock's appropriation by Cold War rhetoric, Smithson avowed that once it is re-cast as a commodity artists may find that their work is integrated into ideological or political values that contrast with their own views.¹²⁵ However, because he developed a project that would not exist as a single object – but would operate as a critical exchange between divergent points in space and time – we can echo Lippard's analysis of conceptualism and argue that Smithson initiated a practice imbued with the potential to evade the art market and allow artists to retain a sense of possession over their work. Sculptures and paintings might be brought and sold, but a project conceived as a dialectic or dialogue that contrasts two polarised locations, cannot. The ideological focus of the piece would have no material existence, and as such no third party would be able to claim ownership of it.¹²⁶

That photography was instrumental to this discourse cannot be overstated. Its presence allowed works that were physically inaccessible to an exhibition in interior space to be situated within its confines. Michael Kirby's claim that photographs can bridge distances in a cognitive manner by directing our attention that which is not there, and thereby unite for the viewer two sections of the same

¹²³ Robert Smithson: "Conversation with Robert Smithson, edited by Bruce Kurtz", *ibid*, p262.

¹²⁴ Robert Smithson: "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", *ibid*, pp 112 – 113.

¹²⁵ Robert Smithson: "Conversation with Robert Smithson", *ibid*, p262.

¹²⁶ Lucy Lippard: "Escape Attempts", 1997, pxiv.

work that are physically separated, provides an apt summary of how Smithson employed the camera.¹²⁷

His use of such strategies can be confirmed by his plan for a *Mirror Displacement* to be staged at the Lake Cayuga Salt Mine, an installation that hinged upon the exchange between museum and nature. As the artist put it in an interview held before the event, he intended to visit the salt mine, place his mirrors in various arrangements within that location, photograph the piece, then situate those images within a gallery interior alongside samples of raw material gleaned from the salt mine itself.¹²⁸

Again, this description highlights the fact that without the camera's intervention the dialectic Smithson intended to create would fail. Without photography, the outdoors would not seep into the exhibition environment and highlight the "abstractness" of the gallery room.¹²⁹ Similarly, if the work's photographic element were removed it would cease to exist as a dialogic piece able to resist the commodity form. But this was a regression into which the *Spiral Jetty* would not fall. On the contrary, it would follow the exhibition plan outlined in the 'Ariel Art' schema. It would exist as "double path" of "signs, photographs and maps", a duality of two and three-dimensional components. Hence the beholder would not view the project as a sacred object, but would experience it as a conflict between a central point and a periphery.¹³⁰

IX: Frame.

However, the importance of the photographic image to Smithson's practice would be far greater than these observations imply. Specifically, it served to maintain the artist's personal manifesto concerning the nature of creative production. As Blake Stimson explains, Smithson strongly opposed the tradition that defined the artist as an individual who possessed an innate capacity for

¹²⁷ Michael Kirby: "A Statement, May 10, 1969" in *Six Years*, 1997, p143.

¹²⁸ Robert Smithson: "Earth: Symposium at White Museum, Cornell University", in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, 1996, p178.

¹²⁹ Robert Smithson: "Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institute, with Paul Cummings", 1996, pp 295 - 296.

¹³⁰ Robert Smithson: "The Spiral Jetty", *ibid*, p153.

emotional expression and “aesthetic experience”.¹³¹ Indeed, he dismissed such qualities as shackles that tethered artists to the “vile laws of culture”, and called upon all producers to seek emancipation from the snares of craft and chains of creativity.¹³²

Yet for all his opposition to notions of creative genius, Smithson’s own words contrive to render him that which he despised. Revisiting his account of the *Spiral Jetty* suggests that an empathic experience similar to that evident in the work of Leskov and Menzel was central to its creation. The artist stands and meditates upon the space before him, the space begins to swirl, and as he allows the ensuing energies to permeate his consciousness he becomes one with the vortex. As Smithson recounts, his eyes became engines that churned “orbs of blood” that blazed with the intensity of the sun.¹³³ Like Pollock, or Friedrich’s Nature Artist, the author of this account might be considered a “romantic or transcendentalist”, a figure blessed with the capacity to experience the natural world on a deep, profound level.¹³⁴ Accordingly, although the ensuing monument would be made with machines rather than physical labour, it can be argued that a trace of this sensitivity would permeate his work and prompt the viewer to engage it through a state of silent awe. Therefore, we must ask how Smithson avoids this contradiction and remains true to his radical position? How does his practice negate what John Berger has called “bogus religiosity”: the false enshrinement of artworks as objects akin to “holy relics”, a judgement made in recognition of their author’s prodigious gifts?¹³⁵ I want to argue that it is Smithson’s use of photography that enabled his art to avoid such regression.

Crucially, Smithson’s engagement with photography is strikingly close to that of Ruscha. Although he experimented with formats particular to photographic practice – notably the photo-essay style of *The Domain of the Great Bear* – he viewed the camera not as an expressive medium, but as a tool with which to convey visual information about material or man-made forms. He even favoured

¹³¹ Blake Stimson: “Conceptual Work and Conceptual Waste” in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice*, 2004, p285.

¹³² Robert Smithson: “The Dislocation Of Craft – And Fall Of The Studio” in “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects”. Taken from Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, 1996, p107.

¹³³ Robert Smithson: “The Spiral Jetty”, 1996, p148.

¹³⁴ Robert A. Sobieszek: *Robert Smithson: Photo Works*, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1993, p15.

¹³⁵ John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin, 1972, p21.

cheap, lowly forms of printing.¹³⁶ As if to confirm the purging of human presence such choices imply, Mariño suggests that there exists a clear parallel between the style of photography employed by Smithson and Walker Evans' notion of photography being practiced without an operator.¹³⁷ That is, as a process in which it is the "object" and not the photographer that makes the image.¹³⁸

For Smithson, such acts of recording yielded a decisive effect. He believed that once photographed an artefact or vista underwent a series of transformations that fundamentally changed its character. For instance, an interview conducted by William C. Lipke saw the artist claim that photography "squares everything". As Smithson comments, the camera catches and holds every possible vista in the confines of a rectangular box, and hence nullifies the romantic possibility of seeking out "the beyond", of chasing the promise of infinite space.¹³⁹

A fragment gleaned from a later discussion clarifies exactly what this squaring, this renouncement of any romantic resonance, means for the artist. As Smithson argued, photographs steal a work's spirit.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, if an artwork is subject to photographic documentation – or is en-framed as a photographic print – the process will achieve the iconoclastic feat of de-mythologizing the object.

A clear example of this deflation occurs in the "photo-painting" technique developed by Richter. As the name suggests, such works are pictures made after a photographic image. Yet the methodology does more than simply transfer the subject of a photograph onto canvas. On the contrary, it sets out to re-create the photographic form in paint itself. Richter wanted to transcend the notion that photographs were the product of a chemical process and instead "make" photographs through materials traditionally understood to be external to the medium.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Robert A. Sobieszek: *Robert Smithson: Photo Works*, 1993, p16.

¹³⁷ Melanie Mariño: "Almost Not Photography", 2004, p64.

¹³⁸ Jean Baudrillard: "For Illusion Is Not The Opposite of Reality", in *Art and Photography*, 2003, p238.

¹³⁹ Robert Smithson: "Fragments of a Conversation" in Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*, 1996, p188.

¹⁴⁰ Robert Smithson: "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson", *ibid*, p251.

¹⁴¹ Benjamin Buchloh: "Readymade, Photography and Painting in the Painting of Gerhard Richter", 2000, p375. Here Buchloh cites *Gerhard Richter*, Venice XXXVIth Biennale, 1972, p23.

The effect of this approach would be profound, for by using the photograph to create a readymade painting Richter advanced his rebuttal of the principles of High Modernism. Like his Colour Charts, Photo-painting allowed the physical and material properties of paint to be explored in a manner that did not spark regression into outdated notions of self-expression.¹⁴² As Steve Edwards observes: claims for the presence of subjective creativity are inappropriate to the image in which the evidence of the artist's hand is supplanted by the inhuman imprint of technology.¹⁴³ Richter's avowal that he blurs his images in order to divest them of any connection with art or craft, and instead suggest a parallel with the smooth perfection of technological production,¹⁴⁴ offers compelling evidence to support this reading. Hence it can be concluded that the photographic context into which Richter placed his work served to imbue it with "non-art" characteristics, an act that would subsequently influence the manner of its reception.

As argued above, Benjamin avowed that photographic reproduction debased the artwork's ability to stage a contemplative, auratic response by subverting notions of "uniqueness and authenticity".¹⁴⁵ Rather than gazing in silent wonder at the item wrought by creative genius, the beholder engages the object in a revised form from which all traits that rendered the original psychologically unapproachable are purged.

Adorno provides a thesis able to confirm such claims. In a reiteration of the argument that an artwork's capacity to be experienced auratically hinges upon the beholder's recognition of the artist's authorial presence, the philosopher reasoned that the aura is like a hand that gently, and with almost loving affection, strokes and softens the contours of an art object.¹⁴⁶ Yet if a work is transfigured as a photographic document, the trace of this hand, of the artist's conscious

¹⁴² Jason Gaiger: "Post-Conceptual Painting: Gerhard Richter's Extended Leave Taking", in *Themes in Contemporary Art*, 2004, p105.

¹⁴³ Steve Edwards: "A Pariah in the World of Art: Richter in Reverse Gear", in *Where Is The Photograph*, edited by David Green, Brighton and Maidstone, Photoforum and Photoworks, 2003, p32.

¹⁴⁴ Gerhard Richter: *Atlas: The Reader*, London, Whitechapel, 2003, p19.

¹⁴⁵ Shierry Weber Nicholzen: *Exact Imagination, Late Works: On Adorno's Aesthetics*, 1997, p182.

¹⁴⁶ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p305.

manipulation of their materials,¹⁴⁷ will be masked beneath the precision of a purely indexical image.

Richter's work achieved something similar. By encouraging the observer to view his work through the context of photographic practice – and hence through connotations of automation and the mechanical – he divested his paintings of the qualities that engender acts of veneration. If photographic reproduction turns artworks into images that are commonplace, unimportant, ubiquitous and cheap,¹⁴⁸ then a project that assimilates traits specific to photography will also prompt such readings. Therefore, despite the undoubted skill of its creator, Richter's practice would not foster the ritualistic reception demanded by Pollock's art, a revision that can be interpreted as key to the painter's ideology. Indeed, Buchloh contends that Richter was sceptical of the historically determined convention to identify artists as producers of auratic artefacts, and thus sought to refuse such distinctions. Aligning his oeuvre with the vernacular products of the camera allowed this goal to be achieved as it reconciled his practice with the mass-produced rather than the sacred.¹⁴⁹

Similar readings can be ascribed to Smithson. Although the act of photographic documentation would not remove the intellect and imagination that had conceived of and shaped the original, it would nonetheless frame his practice in an image from which all traces of aesthetic insight and capacity for feeling are purged, thus diluting the resonance of his authorial presence. As with Richter's work, the low-plane, utilitarian implications of the photograph and "indifferent mechanical eye"¹⁵⁰ of the camera would diminish the transcendence of both the artwork and its maker, thereby transforming the reactions of the beholder.

For example, in a claim redolent of Benjamin's thesis Berger notes that there exists a tendency to view art under the guidance of given assumptions, namely: "beauty, truth, genius, civilization, form, status and taste".¹⁵¹ Conceivably, the spectator could engage Smithson's oeuvre in such terms and receive his earthworks as precious forms. However, because the site/non-site dialectic permits the spectator to encounter such objects through the banality of the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p303.

¹⁴⁸ John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, p32.

¹⁴⁹ Benjamin Buchloh: "Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia and Sigmar Polke" in Benjamin Buchloh: *Neo Avant Garde and Culture Industry*, 2000, p361.

¹⁵⁰ Robert A. Sobieszek: *Robert Smithson: Photo Works*, 1993, p15.

¹⁵¹ John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, p11.

mechanical picture, this situation will be reversed. Regardless of how fantastic the piece may be, its potential to announce itself as the hallowed product of artistic sensitivity is arrested by the artless, mass-produced print through which it is received.

In effect, the photograph invites the viewer to approach the Smithson's land-art through a document that cannot engender a state of reverent meditation. Consequently, the presence of this non-auratic image becomes central to the work's eschewal of mythic classifications. Put simply, the project resists assimilation into the canon of magical artefacts born of celebrated genius because the camera's intervention renders the observer unable to engage it as such. Photography thus completes Smithson's work by allowing it to resist the spheres of craftsmanship and creativity antithetical to his methodology.

On this basis, it is viable to state that all conceptual artworks that were recorded by a utilitarian documentary image would be held within a similar non-auratic frame, a frame that refutes the cultic veneration of insight, imagination and artisanal skill. Therefore, the camera is again revealed as key to conceptualism's resistance of artistic tradition. The archival use of photography negates the "genius myth" because it serves to exorcise any trace of creative consciousness that might haunt an artefact or performance piece.

Moreover, if we return to a recurring motif in these arguments – to the assertion that photography's technical origins placed it somewhere outside of, or incompatible with, the aesthetic¹⁵² – we can reason that a practice framed by the camera lens would refuse the expanded explanations advanced in order to elucidate the artwork's ability to lull its audience into spatial-temporal immersion. For instance, if the photograph is considered a non-aesthetic image the viewer will be disinclined to engage it as they might an object of pure beauty. Thus it will not be approached through a Kantian meditation devoid of any practical interest in the object of contemplation. Accordingly, because the document does not compel the observer to indefinite reverie, the work it depicts will not become suffused with the irreducible spacing such acts engender. Hence it will not attain a position of phenomenal distance from the beholder and will

¹⁵² Jean Baudrillard: "For Illusion Is Not The Opposite of Reality", 2003, p237.

not mirror a defining trait of the artefact that suspends the onlooker in time and space.

It is possible to argue that this refusal of sensory immersion provided a perfect rebuttal of Greenberg himself. In a review written in 1941 the critic stated that pictures had to exist as self-enclosed dramas. Even if they were only landscapes or still lives they still had to be something in which the beholder's eye could "fix and involve itself".¹⁵³ Such comments might be interpreted as evidence that Greenberg championed images able to arrest the viewer and stage the aura's spatial-temporal web. From this point of view, because their practice fostered a polarised mode of reception we might reason that artists such as Smithson or Richter negated Greenbergian Modernism not only by undermining the writer's particular reading of medium specificity, but also by refuting the precise mode of experience he believed works of art had to facilitate.

However, these conclusions do not signal the end of the aura debate. Rather, they point to its continuation. Although Conceptual Art engaged photography in a manner that emphasised its banality and automation, the frequency with which such forms were used paradoxically cast the medium as paintings heir apparent. This, combined with the profusion of projects employing lens-based media, allowed the photographic image to become a constant presence in the gallery, thereby subjecting it to a dramatic shift in status. The anti-art associations that photography endured throughout the age of modernism were replaced by a new post-modern interpretation that viewed photography a standard form of creative labour. Hence, rather than remaining as lowly documents, the products of the camera were transfigured into objects that could be experienced in the manner once reserved for painting.¹⁵⁴

But if photography had finally secured entry into the artistic canon, it follows that the iconoclasm it once engendered would be lost, and with it the potential to disrupt qualities essential to the conditions of auratic experience. Such ideas suggest that the aura could once more become a conduit for approaching works of art. As Nichol森 notes, the assimilation of photography by the gallery sets the

¹⁵³ Clement Greenberg: "Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and Wassily Kandinsky" in *Clement Greenberg; The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I*, 1988, p65.

¹⁵⁴ Blake Stimson: *The Pivot of the World*, 2006, pp 27 – 29.

stage for the “re-auraization” of the photographic image.¹⁵⁵ This situation will be explored in conclusion to my thesis, which seeks to assess the status of the aura today.

¹⁵⁵ Shierry Weber Nicholzen: *Exact Imagination*, 1997, p182.

Conclusion.

Conclusion.

I: A to B.

In chapter five of *From A to B and Back Again*, Andy Warhol described a dilemma arising from his growing celebrity status. The incident in question centred on a request made by a private company keen to develop a working relation with the artist. However, the organisation did not want him to act as a designer or creative consultant. On the contrary, they sought something more elusive. As Warhol recounts, they did not want to buy his “product” but his “aura”. What was meant by this plea remained a mystery to the artist. Yet because his suitors were offering a large sum of money for it, he deemed it prudent to attempt a definition. To that end, the following explanation took shape. For Warhol, the aura was something that was visible only to other people, but there would be a limitation upon how much of it they could see, as individuals would only be able to view “as much of it as they want to”. In this sense, Warhol would comment that the aura was not necessarily located in a particular subject, but in the eyes of the beholder. Furthermore, although he believed that the aura could be seen “on people”, Warhol claimed that it would be visible only on figures that the spectator was unfamiliar with, or had never met.¹

The artist gave an anecdotal explanation to illustrate his idea. One evening, he was enjoying a meal with all the members of his “office”. Because these people knew Warhol well and saw him every day, they felt no awe or humility when in his presence. As Warhol put it, they all treated him “like dirt”. But among the dinner guests was an individual who had never met the artist before, and his reaction upon encountering him was one of sheer wonderment. In Warhol’s analysis, the response of this person offered an important clue about what the

¹ Andy Warhol: *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977, p77.

auratic might be. Put simply, Warhol suggests that the figure in question had not seen his corporeal form, but had actually perceived his aura.²

What is significant about this reading is the fact that Warhol indirectly evokes the myriad ideas I have endeavoured to elucidate. In particular, the artist's assertion that true aura develops through the observer's response to external stimuli anticipates a central motif of my thesis. Specifically, I have striven to correct a frequently formed misconception and argue that the auratic is not a material quality or given property of specific artefacts but a category of perceptual experience: a phenomenon formed in the exchange *between* subject and object of contemplation.

An example of the sensation under discussion lies in the beholder's reception of the natural world, a response Adorno characterised as an act of beholding through which flora and landscapes are viewed in a manner divorced from any sense of practicality. Significantly, this reaction can be attributed to the fact that a horizon enriched with mountainous peaks or a forest illuminated with shafts of sunlight – the examples Benjamin used in his initial definition of the auratic – are both vistas that serve no external ends. Like Kant's flower, they are exemplars of pure beauty. Forests and mountains exist without need to satisfy agenda or criteria, and thus cannot be assessed against rules designed to determine the perfect specimen. Hence if an individual sought to decipher the mystic truths latent in a wilderness untouched by the hand of progress or industry, they would have no choice but to adopt a position of lingering disinterest in the space before them.

Such ideas serve to clarify the relationship between aura and the autonomous. Because autonomy does not denote a mode of sensory experience it cannot be considered directly analogous to the aura. But autonomy can be identified as one of the factors able to induce acts of auratic experience. The object that refutes the forces of heteronomy and exists as a thing-for-itself will appear to defy conceptual analysis, allowing contemplation to become the primary means through which such forms might be best received. As such, the grandeur of nature demands a mode of reception akin to silent meditation: an approach that subsequently fosters the spatial-temporal web of genuine aura.

² Ibid, p77.

Against the background of this example it becomes clear that, for Benjamin, the auratic denotes a situation whereby the subject becomes immersed in an external form. Furthermore, although the natural world is not the only spectacle able to induce genuine aura, the specific conditions of the beholder's response to nature offer the exemplar against which attempts to identify further examples of auratic sensation can proceed. Aura develops when an object is received through the same contemplation Benjamin identifies in the figure who becomes lost in an alpine scene. Such notions elucidate precisely why the auratic must be considered an experiential, and not material, category. Of course, this claim is seemingly contradicted by Benjamin's tendency to identify specific artefacts as things that do possess an aura. Hence what must be emphasised is the fact that when Benjamin offers such descriptions he is not suggesting that a mystical energy radiates from certain forms, but that the item in question holds the capacity to engage the subject in a contemplative state comparable to that triggered by the glories of nature.

Yet if these claims cement the assertion that the auratic refers to an experiential category, then they also raise the contention that the subject's inability to engage external forms in this meditative manner will signal the aura's evanescence. This change does not result from subjective will. It is the outcome of social and economic factors. As argued above, the origins of the aura's deterioration emerge against the crisis of experience evoked by Baudelaire. The allegorical transience of the Second Empire assaulted the subject with a rapid influx of stimuli and turned Paris into dream world born of the ceaseless streams of commodities intended to soothe the danger of insurgency; a phantasmagoria that would be perpetuated by the hordes of intoxicated consumers who massed in pursuit of the capital's ever-evolving flow of goods. Amid this ephemeral space the temporality of sensory immersion was lost and replaced by the constrained sensations of the glance. Events and spectacles were no longer contemplated but wrested from the kaleidoscopic chaos of the metropolis with the swiftest movement of the eyes, a situation that made the auratic obsolete.

Further evidence that the aura's degradation follows transformations in the economic base emerge when one considers that the new patterns of experience mediated by the modern world developed as a psychically necessitated response to the ephemeral climate of commodity culture. As we have seen, the onslaught

of impressions that battered those who paced the city streets – likewise those who worked in the automated halls of modern industry – had to be deflected in order to negate the twin threats of shock and trauma. Yet the need to negotiate the jolting, jarring space of daily reality did not only foster a truncated mode of engagement that rendered subjects able to receive modernity's rush of images and sounds only in the precise moment of their manifestation, it also made perceptual immersion an archaic faculty.

The defensive intervention of consciousness that provided the central reflex of Freud's Pleasure Principle may have diluted the danger of excessive stimulation, but by disciplining the subject in the habitual deflection of excitations it also imposed a sense of indifference whereby external forms would be received in a restricted, ineffectual manner. Accordingly, even if an individual were able to view a scene of natural beauty unmarked by the chaos of urban existence, the establishment of *Erlebnis* as the dominant pattern of experience in empirical life would destabilise their ability to behold the transcendent in a manner able to engender the meditative web of the auratic. Their response would not be one of wonderment but a reaction that might be contextualised against Simmel's notion of the "blasé". Thus, wherever a restricted pattern of experience was enforced, we can reason that the sensory matrix of genuine aura would fail.

Furthermore, the crepuscular hours would not afford any respite from this situation. At the request of Louis Napoleon an increased number of lamps were installed to illuminate Paris. Their glow afforded consumers a sense of security on the capital's nocturnal streets and allowed shops to remain open long into the evening, but this would not be their only effect.³ Indeed, such innovations imply that nightfall would offer no respite from the noise and chaos that compelled pedestrians to engage their surroundings through a restricted pattern of experience. Consequently, twilight would offer no safe haven in which the auratic could retreat and resurface. The city would remain one of swarming movement.

³ Walter Benjamin: "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, pp 28 – 29.

II: The Answering Gaze.

However, the aura debate does not pertain to the experiential climate of empirical reality alone. On the contrary, the contemplative web of the auratic also accounts for the sensations historically encountered by the individual who beholds a work of art. Revisiting Adorno suggests one explanation for this occurrence. Just as the notion of nature being looked upon in a manner shorn of any practical interest offers a potent metaphor for the reverie of the auratic, so too does a contemplation divested of conceptual concerns represent the context in which the subject is required to approach works of art inasmuch as such objects might be defined by their autonomy. Thus the autonomous is once more revealed as a pre-condition of auratic experience.

But this does not mean that the perceptual experiences manifest in daily life have no impact upon those fostered by creative practice, as Manet's Impressionism confirms. The methodological techniques that distinguish the artist's oeuvre not only indicate his intent to capture the sights of the metropolis, they also relay the visual immediacy with which those same subjects would be encountered. For example, in canvases such as *Le Chemin de Fer* it is the painter's attempt to evoke the fleeting sensory climate of the everyday that engenders the spectator's instantaneous reception. This interplay validates notions of a link between spaces that disavow acts of auratic experience and the opposition to sensory immersion that marks works completed against such environments. Adorno argued that human reactions to works of art are not triggered by the specific nature of the object, but are mediated by social and economic conditions.⁴ Accordingly, if the viewer's response to Manet can be defined as anti-auratic, then the causes of this response can be pinpointed as being derived from those societal forces that rendered the experiential landscape of nineteenth century France as inherently opposed to the sensations of genuine aura.

Manet's inability to facilitate Benjamin's "strange weave of time and space" can be thus attributed to his evocation of a climate wherein the influence of commodity exchange rendered the auratic an archaic faculty. Such conclusions

⁴ Theodore Adorno: *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p324.

offer critical evidence to support Benjamin's claim that if transformations in the perceptual experiences staged by works of art can be considered indicative of the aura's decline, then the factors deemed responsible for that shift can be simultaneously used to illuminate the social roots of the aura's decay. Like Baudelaire before him, Manet presents capitalism as the key protagonist in this equation.

Yet the experiential conditions of modernity are not the only factors that impede art's ability to induce acts of sensory immersion. To elucidate this claim it is helpful to re-consider Warhol's suggestion that people as well as things can foster auratic sensations. Although an artwork's capacity to suspend its audience in the indefinite sensory immersion of the auratic has traditionally been entwined with the onlooker's recognition of the object's sacred, magical status, what must also be emphasised is the fact that in the post-Renaissance epoch this cultic response is increasingly indebted to acknowledgements of the artist's standing as a figure of unique creative insight. The person blessed with the sensitivity to see beyond the material limits of their reality and evoke a higher force would be celebrated. Their genius would influence relations with others, inviting a reception equal to that generated by the sacred. The complexities of this interplay have been detailed by my interpretation of Baudelaire's 'Perte d'auréole', but for the purpose of this conclusion a simplified analogy might be located in Warhol's description of the young visitor to the Factory. The individual who greets an artist with a sense of prevailing awe will view their practice with the same reverence, thereby reinforcing the ritualistic manner in which original works of art are engaged.

In this context, the artist becomes locus of the work's aura and hence the figure responsible for the beholder's compulsion to engage products of creative labour in a manner akin to the meditative reception of nature. But if the artwork is purged of the cultic character it derives from the genius of its creator – or if the artist renounces or loses their claim to such status – then it will simultaneously lose its auratic qualities. Photography staged this exact transformation. The camera's mechanical status suggests an automated mode of labour shorn of any subjective intervention. Therefore, in addition to disrupting an object's hallowed spirit by replacing the unique item with endless identical copies, a photographic reproduction will simultaneously encourage the beholder to view the work

through an image that refuses notions of creative authorship. A photograph of a painting or sculpture will not be received in the ceremonial manner reserved for the original because it will not be perceived as the magical product of “transcendent” insight. Rather, it will be approached as the utilitarian outcome of a chemical or technological process. As Jürgen Habermas put it, whenever the structure of the artwork is subject to change, a corresponding transformation will occur in manner in which people perceive and engage works of art.⁵ It is this change of reception that denotes the decline of the artwork’s aura. Accordingly, a practice employing photography as its primary medium will perpetuate this dialogue and become purged of traits that traditionally inspire acts of auratic contemplation, thereby granting the viewer a critical focus upon the social and political motifs relayed by the work.

That the work of Eugène Atget underpinned Benjamin’s belief in photography’s power to divest things of the capacity to generate spatial-temporal immersion has already been discussed. Yet a central argument of my dissertation suggests that Atget’s images paradoxically possess the ability to foster conditions of auratic engagement, thereby placing the validity of Benjamin’s thesis in doubt. To explore this idea it is necessary to return to a question posed in the introduction, specifically, my intent to address the relationship between aura and the empathic.

If aura approximates a meditation through which the subject invests external forms with the capacity to cast an answering gaze, then the auratic can be considered analogous to empathic projection. Because empathy allows the beholder to perceive their second self coalesce with external phenomena, it suggests a mode of experience able to account for the transposition of a relationship between people onto the relationship between the spectator and an artefact wrought by human skill, a natural form, or a work of art. Hence the empathic explains how things can become imbued with a subjective presence able to cast an answering gaze, and thus perpetuate the spatial-temporal web of the auratic. Finally, an undated fragment from Benjamin’s archive seems to compare the perceptual register of empathic projection to the phenomenal distance woven by the contemplative web of genuine aura – when an individual,

⁵ Jürgen Habermas: “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism – The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin” in *New German Critique*, No 17, Spring, 1979, p34.

creature, or inanimate object meets and returns our gaze with a look of its own, we are “drawn initially into the distance”⁶ – thereby reiterating the parity between the categories.

Against the background of this reading it also becomes possible to view the issue of mimesis with greater clarity. The mimetic is strikingly similar to the empathic because both denote an imagined union between subject and object of perception. Furthermore, the categories have related implications for the act of beholding works of art inasmuch as they both describe a sensation whereby the spectator assimilates their second-self, as Vischer put it, unto the composition. Of course, unlike the pattern of embodiment I have explored in relation to Menzel, mimetic reception is not initiated by the work’s perspectival structure. Yet notwithstanding this fact, the interplay between subject and object denoted by mimesis clearly echoes the empathic qualities of genuine aura. Moreover, mimesis underpins the mode of auratic contemplation engendered by works of art that can be understood as works of aesthetic autonomy. For example, the cultic connotations of Pollock’s painting will inspire a state of lingering reverie. But because the image defies analysis by conceptual means the spectator is also compelled to engage it by re-performing its component parts. Crucially, this process will imbue the work with a human presence able to cast a reciprocal gaze and hence extend the spectator’s immersion in time and space. Thus we can conclude that mimesis perpetuates the sensory immersion of the auratic in a manner analogous to an aesthetics of empathy.

As we have seen, Benjamin did discuss the empathic in his work. However, that he made no attempt to read Atget against the dialectical interplay between empathy and the auratic might be considered an oversight. To be sure, a key feature of the photographer’s albums is their ability to evoke an embodied spectator comparable to Wolhiem’s notion of the “protagonist”. For example, *Métiers, boutiques et étalages de Paris* creates empathy by encouraging the observer to identify with the figure of the shopper. Its sequential flow mirrors the un-resting gaze of the worker who scans the capital’s labyrinthine web of stalls and kiosks, thus suggesting an embodied act of looking the spectator can use as a

⁶ Walter Benjamin: “What is Aura?”, in *Walter Benjamin’s Archive*, translated by Esther Leslie, edited by Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwart, Michael Schwartz, Erdmut Wizisla, London, Verso, 2007, p45.

conduit to feel their way into the scene.⁷ A parallel thus emerges between Atget's oeuvre and Blake Stimson's interpretation of the photo-essay's ability to foster corporeal projection by conveying images that encourage the subject to imagine themselves moving from place to place.⁸ Such claims imply that because the viewer of Atget's documents is invited to imbue the object of their perception with a subjective presence able to return the gaze it receives, his work will stage the silent reverie and spatial-temporal web of the auratic.

But this does not guarantee that the corporeal projection initiated by Atget's work would re-create the true sensations of genuine aura. What cannot be overestimated is that any perceptual sensations arising from the subject's imagined entry into *Métiers, boutiques et étalages* would represent the antithesis of quiet contemplation. Central to this claim are the sensory experiences endured by the character with whom the spectator is encouraged to identify. Significantly, the shopper evoked by Atget is an individual who does not linger: their eye is in constant motion as they search out their desired goods. Similarly, such a figure would be traversing a space constituted entirely of fragmentary impressions. The chaos of crowds and speeding carriages, the noise of barter and intoxication of commodities, would surround them. Hence they would be obliged to encounter their environment in a limited, peripheral manner in order to arrest the risk of sensory overload. That the photographer's ability to evoke a protagonist rests precisely on his ability to imply the fleeting, snapshot-like glance with which the city dweller momentarily freezes sights, confirms the brief gaze needed to explore the capital.

Consequently, because it is the beholder's ability to take possession of this look that enables their mind to wander the streets of Paris, we can only conclude that once they have become the character in question they will encounter the depicted environments through a mode of vision that disavows any possibility of auratic sensation. Like the beholder of Manet's art, Atget's audience will explore the city through a glance that matches its ephemerality. Therefore, although his use of sequence seemingly stages the conditions of genuine aura, Atget's work simultaneously resists immersive reverie by compelling the viewer to become a

⁷ See Chapter two, pages 91 – 92.

⁸ Blake Stimson: *The Pivot of the World: Photography and its Nation*, London, MIT Press, 2006, p57.

figure for whom the capacity to experience empirical life in such a meditative manner has become an impossibility.

However, legitimate grounds exist for claiming that if a photographer attempted to stage the variety of embodiment implied by Atget's practice the act need not be considered regressive. The possibility of a project that invites individuals to identify with the life of the worker is one suffused with radical promise. If expanded and perfected, the artwork that fosters an empathic relation with the proletariat could highlight the inequalities fostered by capitalism by compelling the beholder to not only view impoverishment and degradation, but also see their imagined-self enduring such conditions. Against this framework, the act of facilitating a shared gaze between subject and object of contemplation would become suffused with new vitality.

But there is a major problem with this assertion. As Molly Nesbit notes, that an onlooker is encouraged to adopt the "look" of the working-class shopper provides no guarantee that they would understand "how to *use*" the look in question.⁹ The class differences separating the subject and beholder of an image could be so great that even if they approached the work through a state of tranquil contemplation the onlooker's imagination would be simply unable to assimilate impressions of the worker's everyday life. Crucially, this restriction would corrupt the emotional exchange that allows the spectator's self-image to become the individual depicted, or implied by the composition, a situation that would subsequently arrest the picture's potential to engender social change through the act of empathy.

Moreover, Fried contends that photography poses undeniable barriers to the creation of empathy. Central to this argument is a preparatory drawing Menzel developed to support his epic transcription of industrial labour: the *Iron Rolling Mill*. The image is titled *Transport Truck* (1872) and combines two views of the eponymous vehicle, one frontal and one from below. Sketches of other pieces of equipment, and numerous chainlike hooks and links, complete the composition.¹⁰

For Fried, the defining feature of this image is Menzel's ability to relay "the play of opposed forces" between the heavy hooks, links and chains as they move

⁹ Molly Nesbit: *Atget's Seven Albums*, London, Yale University Press, 1992, p161.

¹⁰ Michael Fried: *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth Century Berlin*, London, Yale University Press, 2002, pp 247 – 248.

and pull against each other, a feat that allows the beholder to appreciate the stamina that would be expended by anyone attempting to utilise the depicted objects. But details of this type are deemed woefully absent in photographic studies of manual toil. For example, Lewis Hine's *Top of the Mooring Mast, Empire State Building* (1931) is cited as a work that cannot re-create the subtleties of the *Transport Truck* because it is constrained by the camera's "linear perspective". Whereas Menzel can imagine that he interacts with the object of his vision, and then relay the impressions fostered by that exchange – a process evident in his ability to intuit the physical exertion of labour by suggesting the sheer effort needed to wield the cumbersome apparatus of industry – the photographer is limited to documenting external forms through a mechanical eye. Because the camera is an instrument of indexical precision it will not share painting's potential to produce pictures shaped by the subjective imprints of lived time and inner history. As Andrew Benjamin concurs, because photography freezes single points in time – and thus conveys the instant alone – the medium will ultimately fail to present the "true nature and content of memory".¹¹ It is for these reasons that the brush rather than the lens becomes the pre-eminent tool with which to represent and communicate experience.

If these conclusions are applied to Atget they imply that the onlooker would not encounter the same sensations experienced by Menzel's audience because the photographer would be unable to relay the details of his emotional engagement with his subject. Although he saw the homes of the *chiffonniers*, the medium with which he transcribed these spaces would not evoke his personal response to the environments in question. For example, I have argued that the observer is able to view Menzel's viola studies and fantasize that they are playing the instrument precisely because the artist imagines himself in role of the musician then expresses the sensations generated by that projection. Atget, however, could not stage the same process. Upon contemplating the rag picker's *hottes* he may have intuited the bodily exertion of carrying such a vessel loaded with goods. Furthermore, the ensuing sensations might have coloured Atget's feelings to the extent that he began to see himself as the figure burdened with such a weight. Yet if we accept Fried's claim that photography captures appearances alone we

¹¹ Andrew Benjamin: *Disclosing Spaces On Painting*, Manchester, Clinamen, 2004, pp 92 – 93.

must deduce that Atget would be unable to express the impressions of his imagined empathy with the ragman. As such, his prints would be purged of the conduit through which the spectator might project their self-image into the picture and thus imbue the work with a subjective presence able to return the gaze it receives.

III: Jeff Wall.

Collectively, such arguments counter any doubts surrounding photography's status as a non-auratic medium, thereby confirming the radical potential Benjamin located in the camera's ability to foster revised patterns of beholding antithetical to passive contemplation. But what has not been considered is the possibility that Benjamin's aspirations for the interplay between art and technology were not limited to these developments. This does not mean that photography's ability to evade cultic connotations and convey political rhetoric can ever be considered supplementary to the philosopher's ideology. The contrary is clearly the case. Essential to expounding this claim are the writings of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, notably his commitment to the glorification of war.¹² As Benjamin observed, the artist sought to present human conflict as an aesthetic act. To confirm this claim the philosopher cites an infamously chilling passage as evidence, noting how Marinetti reasons that "war is beautiful" because it initiates humanity's domination of machines, a supremacy evident in the development and use of gas-masks, megaphones, armaments and modern forms of artillery. Moreover, by causing individuals to wear and wield such inventions, Marinetti claimed that war achieved the wondrous feat of cladding the human body in a metal skin. Finally, and perhaps most shockingly, Marinetti avowed that war could be deemed beautiful because it will sow the flaming blooms of gunfire in a newly flowering field.¹³

An extract from Benjamin's denunciation of Ernst Jünger's *War and Warriors* explicates the dilemmas raised by this credo. Like Jünger, Marinetti offered

¹² Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism", in *Art in Theory: 1900 – 2000*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p148.

¹³ Filippo Marinetti, quoted by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)" in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938 – 1940*, p269.

nothing but a clear and unrepentant transposition of the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* onto warfare,¹⁴ a realisation that suggests an ominous conclusion. If hails of bullets and volleys of shells are deemed exemplars of autonomous beauty, the observer will be encouraged to find aesthetic enjoyment in devastation. Accordingly, faced with a situation in which combat is cast as a creative act – and the masses are seduced by the maxim: “create art – destroy the world”¹⁵ – Benjamin believed the direct politicization of art represented the only way to awaken a society encouraged to look upon its own obliteration with a sense of joyous wonder. Crucially, photography and film offered a conduit through which this task could be achieved. Both mediums allowed critical content to be disseminated in a form that could not be approached in the manner reserved for mythic objects. As such, the potency of the work’s message would not be obscured by acts of reverie.

In this context, the camera’s inherent potential to divest or reform qualities that once fostered lingering, auratic immersion becomes emancipatory. Moreover, that Benjamin’s promotion of photographic practice – and critique of methodologies embracing self-expression rather than the communication of radical ideology – stemmed from a drive to challenge the rise of Nazism further illustrates how the corruption of art’s ability to act as a vehicle for the sensations of genuine aura is shaped by events manifest in empirical life.

Yet if we unpick the intricacies of the *Artwork Essay* we encounter the possibility that the development of a photography able to relay ideology did not represent the extent of Benjamin’s ambitions for politicised art practice. Vital to this claim is the philosopher’s contention that Fascism’s entwining of politics and aesthetics raises a condition of “self-alienation” whereby the subject becomes divorced from their perceptual and corporeal relationship to daily life. In other words, portraying politics as synonymous with the autonomous beauty engenders a situation whereby cultural and economic events will be perceived through a faculty comparable to disinterestedness. As Benjamin portentously

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin: “Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warriors*”, edited by Ernst Jünger”, in Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927 – 1934*, London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p314.

¹⁵ Susan Buck-Morss: “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, in *October: The Second Decade, 1986 – 1996*, London, MIT Press, 1997, p376. As Buck-Morss notes, the claim “create art – destroy the world” is a mutation of the “electoral promise” of Emperor Ferdinand I, which read “create justice, transform the world”.

declared, humanity is no longer a spectacle contemplated by Olympian Gods alone. On the contrary, the privilege now extends to the masses, creating the situation whereby society can experience its destruction as an aesthetic pleasure.¹⁶

In this way, Buck-Morss has used such assertions as a framework against which to reason that Benjamin's notion of politicized art was not confined to the transfiguration of creative labour into a mode of ideological critique, but also encompassed an attempt to initiate tasks of greater complexity. Namely, to reverse humanity's alienation from its perceptual and corporeal senses for the sake of its self- preservation, and to achieve this not by forsaking new technologies, but by actively engaging them.¹⁷

This task is given added urgency when one considers that the transformation of politics into an "aestheticized spectacle" is not limited to a specific point in time, but is an ongoing concern throughout history. The change is perpetuated by the evolution of technology, achieving its zenith in our televisual age of media communication.¹⁸ As Jean Baudrillard speculated, advances in information technology mean that the public will increasingly come to perceive reality in the same manner as the astronaut who views the earth from the window of their shuttle. In his analysis, each individual will depend upon machines to facilitate acts of communication and interaction, and will thus find that they have become suspended in a state of total isolation that renders them completely disconnected from the real world.¹⁹

Such claims suggest that the project Buck-Morss identifies in the closing pages of the 'Artwork Essay' must be completed in order to arrest a deepening crisis. The problem with this assertion, however, rests on the fact that the transformation in question is fraught with difficulty. Art is called upon to re-stage the subject's perceptual and bodily engagement with everyday life in order to undo the beholder's estrangement from the empirical sphere. Hence we might reason that the task facing creative labour is to re-assert that the human subject exists within the corporeal and sensory landscape of empirical reality, and thus

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)", 2003, p270.

¹⁷ Susan Buck-Morss: "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: 1997, p377.

¹⁸ Ibid, p376.

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard: "The Ecstasy of Communication", in *The Post-Modern Reader*, edited by Charles Jencks, London, Academy Editions, 1992, p152.

cannot view the social relations of the modern world from a detached vantage point. Conceivably, once this connection is registered the spectator will no longer be able to approach events as war with meditative calm.

How, then, might creative practice complete this task? One solution emerges in relation to the art of embodiment. If an artist were to revivify the aesthetics of empathy they would reverse the estrangement of humanity from society by re-asserting the existence of a physical and emotional connection between subject and object of contemplation. For example, the imagined projection that Menzel's audience is invited to perform negates any alienation between the viewer, their senses and their surroundings because it compels them to interact with an item or explore a landscape as they might in the everyday. Therefore, to re-establish the relationship between human perception, corporeal sensation and empirical life, artistic labour could follow Menzel and assert that the lived body always occupies a lived experiential relationship to the empirical realm.²⁰

Accordingly, the equivalence between aura and empathy implies that a return to the principles of embodiment would require artworks to once more facilitate the sensory conditions of auratic perception. But as Menzel's late works indicate, the experiential transformations enacted by the sensory climate of modernity renders any attempt to rejuvenate empathic experience, and by extension genuine aura, problematic. The fragmented optical climate of modernity restricts the observer's ability to enter the meditative state whereby they might open an emotional reciprocity with external phenomena, and hence, perceive an image of their moods and feelings coalesce with the object of their vision. As Baudrillard put it, "people no longer project themselves into their objects".²¹

This loss is decisive, for if empathy represents the faculty that allows the subject to engage impressions of the world, then the ruination of such sensations might be considered a root cause of the perceptual estrangement that renders individuals sensorially disassociated from their surroundings. And hence as that which must be resolved in order to negate the dilemma to which Benjamin alludes. Yet the difficulty of this task is compounded when one recalls that painting, the medium identified as key to the facilitation of the spectator's empathic projection – particularly in Fried – has become increasingly

²⁰ Michael Fried: *Menzel's Realism*, 2002, p254.

²¹ Jean Baudrillard: "The Ecstasy of Communication", 1992, p150.

marginalised as a critical discourse. The transformations in creative labour espoused by the avant-garde and continued by Conceptual Art are a case in point. This fact, combined with Buck-Morss' assertion that Benjamin intended to undo the alienation of the human sensorium by using technology, implies that if art were to revive embodiment the project would be achieved through media other than easel painting.

Crucially, a case exists for claiming that Jeff Wall has achieved this exact outcome. Although early works such as the *Landscape Manual* parallel Smithson's de-personalised use of the camera, much of the artist's oeuvre recalls the tableaux of Rejlander and Peach Robinson. For example, in pictures such as *A Sudden Gust of Wind* digital technology is used to fuse myriad images into a coherent whole, creating a scene that evokes Katsushika Hokusai's famous impression of a windswept landscape in rural Japan. The synergy between both works is evinced by Wall's replication of the spiralling papers caught in the breeze, the tall trees buffeted by the gale, and the scattered figures who brace themselves against its force.²²

In part, this eschewal of the dead-pan, anti-aesthetic documentation central to the use of photography in Conceptual Art can be traced to Wall's assertion that because photography is irreducibly tied to depiction it could never replicate the dematerialisation offered by language. Recognition of this fact thus prompts the realisation that the camera was ultimately compelled to transcend the ideals of photoconceptualism and re-engage the pictorial project previously exemplified by easel art.²³

Yet Wall's practice has also been driven by an attempt to re-stage Baudelaire's painting of modern life. Indeed, for Wall the task of focusing upon "the everyday and the now" was a project of great artistic significance. Nevertheless, the decision to address this brief through photography remains perplexing. The question of whether photography could be considered an appropriate medium through which to give aesthetic form to the everyday was raised in discussion with David Shapiro. But Wall did not expound his attempt to revivify a painterly

²² Laura Mulvey: "A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai): from After to Before the Photograph" in *Oxford Art Journal: Volume 30, Number 1, Jeff Wall Special Issue*, 2007, pp 29 – 30.

²³ Jeff Wall: "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" in Jeff Wall: *Selected Essays and Interviews*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art and London, Thames and Hudson, 2007, pp 167 – 168.

practice through photography beyond the claim that the term painter was indivisible from that of artist or creator and thus might be applied to practices that exceeded the material components of the medium.²⁴

Yet a critical text dating from 1984 offers a different explanation, one that necessitates a brief recourse to Baudelaire's original ideas. To reiterate the poet's thesis, each point in history possesses a style of behaviour, a mode of dress and an act of looking particular to itself.²⁵ Hence the artist who captured such details would be considered truly modern because they transcribed the demeanours, mores and styles unique to their lifetime. Wall, however, claimed that this idea created a problematic legacy for future painting to negotiate. Specifically, he argued that the aforementioned need to negotiate psychological shocks in everyday life had compressed the gestures and behaviours of the masses into "reflex actions" and "compulsive responses". These condensed, violent movements were identified as incompatible with classical aesthetics, prompting Wall's turn to photography in order to isolate and enlarge the "micro gestures" of modernity. As the artist reasoned: the compressed actions that lend themselves particularly well to photography are the only remnants "of the older idea of gesture as the bodily, pictorial form of historical consciousness". A continuation of Baudelaire's manifesto thus had to appropriate photographic techniques to fully express the modern condition.²⁶

But in developing this project Wall would simultaneously re-open a further methodology. Here I refer to Fried's contention that Wall's oeuvre belongs to a body of recent photography that engages a specific tradition of creative practice: namely, the attempt to stage the illusion of the beholder's non-existence by depicting figures who make no attempt to acknowledge the onlooker stood beyond the frame.²⁷ Historically, this has been achieved in two ways. The painter either portrays individuals who are absorbed in a particular task to the exclusion of all external stimuli, or else depicts a group that appears utterly engrossed in

²⁴ Jeff Wall: "David Shapiro: A Conversation with Jeff Wall", *ibid*, pp 306 – 307.

²⁵ Charles Baudelaire: "The Painter of Modern Life" in Charles Baudelaire: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, London, Phaidon, 1964, p13.

²⁶ Jeff Wall: "Gestus" in *Jeff Wall*, edited by Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, Boris Groys and Jean-François Chevrier, London, Phaidon, 2003, p76.

²⁷ Michael Fried: *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, London, Yale University Press, 2008, p2.

the dramatic events unfolding within the picture space.²⁸ As Fried concludes, such works can be considered anti-theatrical inasmuch as they refute conscious attempts to address the viewer, a notion that finds its exemplar in the art of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. For example, in *The Card Castle* (1737) Chardin paints a young man attempting to build a house of cards. This protagonist appears so lost in his occupation that he becomes oblivious to the open draws and upturned cards that surround him. These details are natural points of attraction for the viewer, yet the youth's indifference to them suggests that his state of mind excludes all external factors, the spectator included.²⁹

For Fried, such interpretations can be applied to Wall's oeuvre. He locates the 1992 composition *Adrian Walker, Artist, Drawing from a Specimen in the Laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* against the sense of captivation expressed by images like *The Card Castle*, noting how the eponymous artist who sits and draws from the somewhat ghoulish subject of a severed hand seems so focused on his task that he becomes impervious to all distractions.³⁰ As if to confirm this connection, Wall has himself compared the deep concentration displayed by *Adrian Walker* to that evoked by Chardin and, furthermore, has advanced Fried's reading of absorption as a thesis that could be used to contextualise his own art.³¹ But if this is the case, it follows that Wall will also replicate the particular mode of reception initiated by works centred upon the portrayal of absorptive motifs. It is this notion that I wish to engage.

Importantly, Fried reasons that pictures conveying figures in absorptive states will lull the spectator into deep contemplation.³² This position might be applied to Wall's practice, which Fried suggests fosters an act of beholding analogous to the "total immersion" through which Wittgenstein engaged the worlds and

²⁸ Michael Fried: *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, London, University of California Press, 1980, pp 66 – 68.

²⁹ Ibid, pp 48 – 49.

³⁰ Michael Fried: *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, 2008, p40.

³¹ Jeff Wall: "Interview with Martin Schwander (1994)" in *Jeff Wall*, 2003, p127.

³² For example, referencing accounts written in the eighteenth century Fried contends the beholder would be "stopped and held, sometimes for hours at a stretch" by pictures conveying absorptive motifs. See *Absorption and Theatricality*, 1980, pp 131 – 132.

environments visualised on the cinema screen.³³ But the effects of absorption are not limited to these sensations. To be sure, compositions featuring individuals lost in their own interests would not only arrest the spectator, but would compel their mind to enter the scene. Fried illustrates this through examples gleaned from the writings of Dennis Diderot, the pre-eminent art critic of Chardin's era. An extract from his salon review of 1763 introduces the motif of corporeal projection in relation to Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg's *Un paysage avec figures et animaux*. As he views the picture, Diderot begins to imagine that he has entered the work and is walking through the depicted landscape. This fantasy is so intense that his senses become influenced by the illusory reality of the scene, as evidenced by his wish to pause and gain respite from the burning sun overhead.³⁴

Yet it is the critic's response to Jean-Baptiste le Prince's *Pastorale Russe* (1765) that epitomises such acts of embodiment. The image depicts an old man who sits beneath the shade of a tree and listens intently to a boy playing what appears to be a flute or pipe. A young girl standing at the man's side is similarly absorbed in this performance. As Fried recounts, the sense of captivation expressed by these figures first arrests Diderot, then draws his imagination into the canvas. He finds himself standing within the reality conveyed by the picture, and this merger is one that conveys a full range of corporeal and emotional sensations. First, the critic will lean against the tree – between the old man and the young woman – and share their contemplation of the younger man's music. Then, in his mind, a wholly new scenario evolves. He imagines that once the youth has stopped playing, and the old man takes up his balalaika, he will happily rest and listen to his recital. And when darkness begins to fall, Diderot says that he and his new companions will retire to the old man's hut, as if to continue their impromptu concert.³⁵

Such observations imply that the pictorial motif of absorption yields an effect strikingly similar to empathy. Like the beholder of Menzel's art, the audience of le Prince enters a meditative state whereby they perceive their self-image merge

³³ Michael Fried: *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, 2008, pp 79 – 80. Here Fried refers to Norman Malcolm's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, London, Oxford University Press, 1958.

³⁴ Michael Fried: *Absorption and Theatricality*, 1980, pp 118 – 120.

³⁵ Denis Diderot: *Salon of 1765*, quoted by Michael Fried, *ibid*, p121.

with the canvas. Hence if Wall updates the project initiated by such practice, it is eminently possible that his work will provide a similar union between beholder and image.

Initially, this might seem like speculation, but the proposition proceeds from a critical base. For Fried, the process of embodiment described by Diderot was a sensation engendered by specific varieties of work: that of genre painting or images of the everyday. Unlike the intense drama of history painting, the vernacular themes displayed by such scenes would be inadequate to the “passionate feelings” and “extreme states of mind” needed to successfully neutralise the beholder’s presence. Consequently, painters working in these categories would have to compel the viewer to metaphorically enter the image, as this would be the only way in which they could sustain the fiction that there was no spectator stood before the canvas. As Fried notes, artists achieved this by intensifying the sense of absorption conveyed by the protagonists of their work in order to create an “existential reverie”, a sensation wherein the viewer loses all interest in their physical surroundings and becomes fully immersed in the subject of the painting, to the extent that their imagination begins to coalesce with the image.³⁶ Wall’s practice might be viewed in such terms, for although it has been read as an art of absorption it also represents an attempt to evoke the details of daily life. Thus if his work continues the manifesto of anti-theatricality and, moreover, focuses that project upon the depiction of figures engrossed in everyday activities, it becomes feasible to reason that it will follow *Le Princé* and initiate a corporeal merger between subject and object of contemplation.

For instance, in an image like *Untangling* (1994) – which depicts a workman struggling to unravel a coiled mass of entwined rope – the sheer focus displayed by the central figure might captivate the viewer, and through that captivation draw them into the scene. Similar assessments could be applied to works like *The Guitarist* (1987), which bears several similarities to the *Pastorale Russe*. Both depict individuals engrossed in the activity of playing a musical instrument, in Wall’s case the eponymous girl who plays an electric guitar; and both feature an onlooker who seems to be engrossed in the performance. The male character seated to the right of Wall’s composition displays a sense of captivation similar

³⁶ Michael Fried: *Absorption and Theatricality*, *ibid*, pp 130 – 131.

to that expressed by the old man who listens to the young musician in Le Prince's scene. Accordingly, if the synergy between the pictures is advanced it is viable to suggest that the observer of Wall's tableaux will be engrossed by the sense of concentration it evokes, and will thus find that their imagination is lulled into the image.

Interestingly, an interview he conducted in 1989 implies that Wall intended such sensations. As the artist elucidates, "My experience of the works I have really admired is a kind of out-of-body experience". The sensation in question is, Wall explains, a continual dialectic of "identification and dis-identification" with the object, a process he identifies as potentially crucial to the possibility of experience itself.³⁷

That Wall considers an act of embodied seeing or experiential exchange between viewer and work as key to ambitious practice invites the hypothesis that he sought to stage a similar interplay through his own art. Therefore, we might argue that Wall drew upon his declared familiarity with Fried's writing and developed an art centred upon absorptive motifs in order to achieve this very effect. Similarly, the fact that Wall has classified his oeuvre as "autonomous art"³⁸ suggests that it will necessitate the mimetic reception appropriate to the composition that exists as a thing-for-itself, and thus require the subject to assimilate themselves unto the composition. However, the strongest evidence to support claims that Wall wanted to engender sensations akin to Baudelaire's "Holy Prostitution of the Soul" emerges in the following comment. Not only have I worked upon pictures detailing the motifs of "resistance, survival, communication" and "dialogue". I have also striven to create "scenes of empathy, and empathetic representation".³⁹ What is here called "empathetic representation" suggests a project strikingly close to that attempted by Menzel. Thus we might conclude that Wall's photographic tableaux were intended to initiate an emotional exchange between viewer and work.

One possible explanation of how Wall achieves this feat emerges when once considers the fact that he constructs photographs rather than taking them.

³⁷ Jeff Wall: "Representations, Suspicions, and Critical Transparency: An Interview with Jeff Wall by T.J. Clark, Claude Gintz, Serge Guilbaut, and Anne Wagner" *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 2007, p213.

³⁸ Jeff Wall: "A Democratic, a Bourgeois Tradition of Art: A Conversation with Jeff Wall by Anne-Marie Bonnet and Rainer Metzger": *ibid*, pp 246 – 247.

³⁹ Jeff Wall: "Representations, Suspicions, and Critical Transparency": *ibid*, p212.

Because he is not documenting a contingent scene, but creating what he calls “near-documentary”, Wall, we might reason, is able to return to the mode of production I have described in relation to Leskov. That is, Wall’s practice is not limited to the recording of appearances, but can proceed from a perspective influenced by the data of his experiences and memories. Like a painter, Wall can exert complete control over his composition, directing, staging and re-shooting his models until he has achieved the fullest evocation of the sensations he wishes to convey, thereby breathing a sense of inner life into the figures that populate his pictures. Accordingly, this imagined repertoire – to borrow Wollheim’s term – of thoughts and feelings, might be identified as that with which the viewer engages in order to empathise with the characters depicted by Wall’s work. Thus we might claim that the observers of *Adrian Walker* are able to empathise with the artist’s quiet meditation of his work – and thus imagine themselves sat at his desk, sharing in both his activity and the patient reflection it inspires – because Wall has created an image that offers a highly concentrated representation of such motifs.

Together, these arguments intimate that by inviting acts of imagined projection, Wall’s work will become imbued with a subjective presence able to foster the returned glance characteristic of the auratic. Undoubtedly, it is possible to dismiss the return to pictorialism that has enabled Wall to engender such sensations as a reactionary retreat into past styles. Similar judgements might be levelled at Wall’s methodologies, which have been associated with an attempt to re-assert the validity of artistic creativity, subjectivity and craftsmanship, thus negating the ideologies espoused by Tret’iakov, Heartfield and Kosuth. But to discount the artist’s work on such grounds would be to overlook the wider implications of his labour. Importantly, by developing a practice able to stage a pattern of beholding that invites the onlooker to explore and engage the composition as a corporeal presence, Wall also introduces into the spectator’s consciousness a range of tactile, optic and sonic sensations that can potentially undo the sensory alienation that divorces the subject from daily life and hence re-assert the reciprocity between the individual, their senses and the everyday, thereby reversing the crisis highlighted in the closing paragraphs of the ‘Artwork Essay’.

As such, we might claim that the value of Wall's art rests on two interrelated points: Firstly, Wall's photography possesses the ability to facilitate and re-awaken a mode of experience that has been divested from daily life. Secondly, the experience his work revivifies can be identified as key to the resolution of the crisis posed by sensory alienation. Indeed, if the pattern of reception fostered by Wall parallels that initiated by images of absorption, then the observer of his art will seemingly encounter sensations comparable to those described in Diderot's salon reviews and find that their senses are stimulated and directed by the object of their vision – as if to suggest a lived relationship to the reality conveyed by the photograph, and by extension the empirical sphere itself.

Such arguments serve to imbue the empathic matrix of the auratic with a clear political significance. But this does not mean that we can simply identify the aura as essential to critical practice, nor claim that photography can become valid as fine art only when it is able to succeed painting and become the locus of Benjamin's strange weave of time and space. Rather, what must be emphasised is the fact that because the aura is subject to the influence of economic and social relations its critical potential will undergo violent oscillations and become polarized by ruptures and revolutions in the conditions of daily life itself. As Miriam Hansen has asserted, the possibility that auratic experience might be liberated from the "dead-end of cult and social privilege", and be transfigured into a progressive social force, hinges upon a moment of transformation in the existing conditions of economic production.⁴⁰

As such, we cannot claim that Wall's oeuvre offers irreducible proof that empathic, auratic art possesses a critical value greater than its non-auratic other. Rather, we must assert that if the auratic, embodied perception offered by Wall's oeuvre can be deemed progressive it is only because the economic conditions contemporary to the artist have staged a climate in which it becomes possible to view the phenomenon in such terms. The question of whether the aura can retain this position in light of ensuing mutations in, or cleaving of, dominant social relations will, no doubt, provide the impetus for future critical practice and philosophical engagement.

⁴⁰ Miriam Hansen: "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology" in *New German Critique* Number 40, Winter 1987, p191.

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